LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Prologue

The sun hung a hand's-span above the rugged peaks of the Irontooth Range, red and swollen--painful-looking, like a boil.

Yet still beautiful. Jevais Evenstar sighed, blinking the tears from his eyes. With an effort, he turned his back on the sinking sun, faced east out across the barren expanse of the Iron Plain. The distant Delaris Mountains were small, serrated teeth along the cloud-darkened eastern horizon, black on roiled black. Five days' walk to the southeast of those peaks, Jevais knew, lay the kingdom of Cara Fahd.

How were the Carans faring? he wondered. Were their preparations complete?

He sighed again, a deep, heartfelt sound. Images of his visit to Cara Fahd flooded back into his mind ... How long ago had that been? Must be two decades, now ... Such a vibrant culture it had been, so *alive*. How had those proud Carans faced up to the decisions they'd had to make? How did they feel, now that the consequences of those decisions were upon them? Did they look to the setting sun as Jevais did, and ache at the bitter symbolism?

Again he had to blink away the tears that blurred his vision. Foolish, he tried to tell himself. Stare into the sun long enough, and of course your eyes will water ...

Wood and leather creaked behind him. Rubbing at his eyes with the back of a fist, he turned.

An ox-drawn wain was crawling across the hard ground of the Iron Plain. As Jevais watched, the drover shot a fearful glance toward the western horizon, then lashed the haunches of his ox with a whip. The shadows of wagon, ox, and drover reached toward Jevais like something in a nightmare, long and distorted out of normal shape. A soul-deep chill shook Jevais, a sudden aversion to being touched by the black fingers of the shadow. He knew that was pure foolishness, of course, but he stepped back just the same. He raised his hand in salute to the wain driver, a gesture of ... Of what? he wondered suddenly. Some pitiful act of solidarity?

The wain rumbled on toward the looming shape of the kaer. One of the last wains, Jevais knew. Probably one of the crofters who'd lived south of the town of Moar. Stubborn souls, incredibly self-sufficient.

Well, they'd have to be, wouldn't they? Who else but stubborn, self-sufficient bastards could force the hard Iron Plain to vouchsafe them a living? Rather than following everyone else and splitting up the more fertile land to the west of the town, the independent crofters had decided that independence and seclusion

were more important to them than ease of life.

How will they handle life within the kaer? **The thought jolted Jevais slightly. He'd never really considered it before. He turned once more to follow the wain with his eyes. How many of the independent crofters were already in the kaer? And how many would never step within its walls? That was their right, of course. Even Theran law, otherwise so oppressive, didn't take away a freeman's right to choose the time and nature of his own death ... And how many of the crofters were still working their land? Certainly, they knew the storm was coming. They knew what were their chances of survival--slim and none. But maybe, to them, facing the coming Scourge huddled in the stone farmhouses their forefathers had built was a less weighty doom than locking themselves away from the open sky until they, their children, and their children's children were dust ...**

Heavy thoughts, he told himself glumly. But if this wasn't the day for such musings, then when?

A low hill, stubbled like an old man's chin with hardy shrubs and grasses, rose to the south, blocking his view of Moar. Only a brief walk would bring Jevais to the top of that rise, opening to his gaze the spectacle of Moar--its streets and houses, the placid Tethralias River meandering through its midst, the fields and orchards and vineyards spreading toward the distant Irontooth Range, and the scattered crofts south of the town. Only a brief walk, to look one last time upon the town that had given him birth, that had sheltered him through childhood, that had guided him toward his Calling. . .

No. He was glad of the hill. He wouldn't take that walk, no matter how short, no matter how Moar called to his heart. His soul couldn't take it, his control already stretched to the limit. There was no way--no way at all--it could survive even a single glance at the town nestled in its narrow valley.

And control was vital, on this of all days. The people of Moar looked to *him*, Jevais knew that. More than they should, perhaps. Certainly more than they did to the Council of Elders. It was understandable, of course. But understanding didn't lessen the pressure he felt; how could it? He was a troubadour, after all, and with that calling came responsibilities. He could *sense* the mood of the townsfolk--those who'd already vanished into the waiting kaer and those who were taking this opportunity to walk free one last time under the sky. He could sense the ... the *fragility* ... of their resolve. For many, the decision to enter the kaer was balanced on a knife edge. Undeniably, all knew of the coming Scourge. They'd read the books and parchments, they'd listened to the songs and lays that Jevais and his fellows had recited to them. They could count the years, count the turning seasons, as well as any. They knew the signs.

Yet there was still the eternal mismatch between *knowing* and *feeling*, that gulf that must be crossed to achieve true conviction. The Scourge was approaching; the Horrors would soon be here. *If* the old words, the portents, were to be believed. But nobody had *seen* a Horror, not in Moar. Nobody had *experienced* the terror of the coming Scourge. Of course they'd heard the tales from elsewhere in the world, brought by traveling merchants and adventurers, and even by the occasional itinerant troubadour. Tales of dark wraiths hunting the streets of Majallan, of shriveled babies in Draoglin, of insectile creatures infesting southern Barsaive.

Yet ... they were only travelers' tales, weren't they? Nothing had sucked the souls from Moar's children. No shadowy creatures had stalked the town's nighttime streets. No insect-creatures had torn the hearts from Moar's farmers. Travelers *always* told wild tales, didn't they? How else would they impress the locals sufficiently that they wouldn't have to pay for their ale in the local taproom? In the absence of personal experience, how easy it was to doubt.

And doubt tore at him too, raking his soul every time he thought of the enclosing walls and ceilings of the waiting kaer. He'd *lived* with the old words. As a troubadour, they were his life, as much a part of him as his blood and bone and marrow. Yet, even so, he felt doubt. *Maybe the words and the omens and the predictions are all wrong. Maybe there* is *no coming Scourge. Maybe we're burying ourselves alive ... for* what?

Jevais rubbed at his long face with his hands--*hard*, as if to bring the blood back to a cold-bitten extremity. No, he told himself firmly. The words speak truly. The Scourge is coming, and, with it, all our choices narrow down to two. Enter the kaer ... or die. Slowly, with a crushing sense of finality, he turned his back on the town of his birth one last time.

The kaer--Kaer Moar--loomed before him, a huge shape against the pink-flushed sky. Stark and sheer its walls rose from the stony soil of the Iron Plain, towering hundreds of feet above his head. Surprisingly smooth-sided it was, a shatter-topped cone formed of bleak, black basalt and granite. It just sat on the hardpan of the plains like a plaything set down by giants, or maybe by the Passions themselves when they had tired of it. It was easy to imagine its flat, circular base pressing down on the plain with the force of countless tons of hard rock.

Foolishness, of course. Anyone with even a scrap of education knew that the cone hadn't been dropped from above, but had risen from below. The sheer walls of rock plunged down into the earth, deeper--*much* deeper--than they towered above Jevais. How deep do they go? he wondered for the thousandth time. Hundreds of feet? Hundreds of yards? Deeper still? He knew that the artisans who'd fashioned Kaer Moar had constructed a dozen and a half circular levels within the mount--each larger than the one above, and many of them empty to make space for increasing population--but how far below the lowest level did the cone itself extend?

The rocky cone that had become Kaer Moar was a volcano, of course: a cone of lava, igneous and metamorphic rock, built up over countless centuries, even millennia. Long dormant, everyone knew that ... but not fully extinct. Certain springs and subterranean rivulets still ran scalding, implying that *some* activity still continued deep in the heart of the rock. There was a danger, obviously, that the volcano would wake and destroy the kaer from within before the Scourge had passed--or possibly even as a *result* of the Scourge--regardless of the wards and guards around it, but it was also a blessing. The earth itself would provide the heat to warm the inhabitants, to counteract the bitter, biting cold of winter.

Kaer Moar was a monument to the skills of Moar's artisans, a fact Jevais recognized even though he had little idea of the actual skills involved. Somehow, those artisans--stonemason-adepts, most of them, assisted by elementalists--had opened the central chambers of the volcanic cone, dug it out, and then divided it into levels and concourses, rooms and chambers, galleries and stairways. (The work would have gone easier, Jevais knew, if more obsidimen had numbered among the workers. That Name-giver race had innate skills in the working of rock that would have been incredibly valuable. But it was the nature of this region, between the Irontooth Range and the Delaris Mountains, that obsidimen were seen only when "Rock-brother" travelers passed through Moar.)

The natural structure of the cone had aided the workers more than it had hindered, but it was still an amazing undertaking. Finally, they'd sealed the accessways--natural caves and lava tubes, and several tunnels they'd driven themselves--through which they'd reached the heart of the rock, the knife-edged crater itself. Sealed all but one. Then the nethermancers and the elementalists and the wizards had worked their wards, sealing those accessways--and the entire massive structure of the cone--with true earth, binding it with dire and powerful magics. Now only a single access remained: a broad tunnel already named for the day when the kaer would open once more to the sun, generations in the future: the Dawngate.

The huge metal and stone doors stood open now. Soon they would close, and Jevais would never see them open again in his lifetime. Once they'd closed, Moar's single surviving wizard would descend to the heart of the kaer, to the great "keystone" of the magical wards that would protect Jevais, his townsfolk, and their descendants for four centuries. The wizard would activate the mighty "charges" of blood magic his colleagues had given their lives to infusing into the living rock. Locked and sealed by mundane means, the Dawngate would be secured by magic as well, the same magic that permeated the entire structure. The same magic that would--*hope against hope!*--keep the Horrors from penetrating the kaer.

When the time was right, centuries hence, when various provisions indicated that the Scourge had passed, the keystone would be deactivated, the magical fire of the wards banked for the last time. The locks and bars and gates would be set aside, and the Dawngate once more would open to the world. Open once more to the sky and the sun and the rain, and the free winds ...

With a snort, Jevais forced that train of thought aside. As well to think about the day the sun burns out to a cinder, he told himself bitterly. I'm just as likely to see either.

Walking slowly back to the kaer, he saw that the group of people around the Dawngate had contracted. Not decreased in number--there were still a hundred, more, of his friends and neighbors braving the needle-sharp wind of evening to fill their senses one last time with the greater world.
But *contracted* nonetheless, as though the inevitable moment's proximity impelled them to draw closer to one another, to shore up their crumbling resolve with *contact*, with sheer physical closeness.

There was little conversation, and what there was was kept to low whispers. Few of the townsfolk even looked at their fellows around them, instead turning their eyes to the sky and the land and the distant mountains. *As if they're trying to pretend they're experiencing this alone. . .without giving up the sense of proximity*. Jevais smiled sadly. He could feel the mood, the emotions, like gentle currents and eddies around him. Instinctively, his training as a troubadour came into play, the ability to sense the weave of things while also maintaining the detachment necessary to observe accurately.

Deep in the kaer, the Great Horn sounded--the horn cast specifically for this purpose, to be winded only now, and again on the day the Dawngate would swing open. Low-pitched, rounded, mellow, it echoed sadly through the chambers and corridors of the kaer. Like a cry of despair, of tragedy, from some great beast, it pierced him to the heart with its ineffable sadness.

And not only him, Jevais saw. Many of those around him flinched away from the sound, as one would from news of a loved one's death. Slowly, the group began to move inside.

Jevais watched them as they did. *My people. My charges*. They seemed shrunken, drawn in on themselves--even Garrth the blacksmith looked diminished, his barrel-chest hollow. As though their cores had been ripped from them, and they'd fallen inward into the emptiness ...

A shrill cry distracted him from his dark thoughts. A young child, maybe seven summers, was struggling with his mother, screaming something about a missing pet. Quickly Jevais looked around him, but the wayward creature was nowhere to be seen.

And there was no time to look. The Great Horn sounded a second time, the fog-call of a great ocean vessel following an unknown course. Already the Dawngate was beginning to close. The child's screams took on a hysterical note as his mother dragged him into the closing kaer. Once more, Jevais glanced quickly around. Still no sign of the beloved animal. Amazing, he thought bleakly. Even when you think your soul's full up with sadness, there's still room for another draught ...

Moments later, he was alone, the last inhabitant of Moar to seek the shelter of the great kaer. The massive doors of the Dawngate, marked with their runes and symbols of protective magic, were swinging ponderously closed. Hurriedly, he strode toward the narrowing opening.

***What ...?* He turned suddenly, sharply. A cold breath--not wind--on the nape of his neck, a sharp sense of presence behind him, though he was alone. His skin crawled.**

He snorted again. Foolishness. His imagination was running away with him. After all, he thought once more, what better day for dark and depressing fancies?

Jevais Evenstar stepped across the threshold, into the cool stillness of the kaer. Behind him, through the closing crack between the doors, he saw a final flash of the sun sinking red behind the Irontooth Range--the sun he would never see again as mortal man.

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Chapter One

At the next broad landing, Delain Evenstar hesitated. What level was this?

He laughed softly, his musical voice echoing off the finely dressed basalt. It was so easy to lose track, particularly here on the Scytha Stair in the lesser-used parts of the kaer. He touched the smooth black lintel of a doorway. Granted, the artisans who'd fashioned Kaer Moar had had plenty to worry about; and granted, the Scytha Stair was nowhere near as important or well-used as the Great Gyre ... But how much more effort would it have taken, really, to mark the landings with some glyph or carved symbol? Or to subtly change the hue of the light quartz crystals to indicate the level?

He shook his head, brushing a wayward lock of fine blond hair back from his eyes. Best to keep those ideas close, he reminded himself, his amusement suddenly fading. Particularly now.

With a soft sigh, he put that train of thought aside. He was, after all, centuries too late to ask the kaer's artisans about their design decisions. And anyway, he had other things to think about at the moment.

Like where in the name of Death *was* he? He shook his head again and smiled gently. That's what came of letting his fool mind wander. Some troubadour-apprentice I am, he chided himself. And to think when I was really young I wanted to be a map maker ...

For a moment he closed his eyes and forced himself to remember. *Five flights up ... No, six*. That meant this was the Level of Jaspree. Which meant, in turn, that he had another three flights to climb to reach the Level of Astendar. He patted the cold stone lintel once more and started climbing again, the click of his boot-heels echoing through the deserted stairwell.

The air was chill and damp, here on the Scytha Stair, settling into Delain's lungs and bones like ancient despair. For a moment, he imagined how it must have been in the early years of the kaer--the Stair bustling with activity, even though it was only a secondary route, filled with echoing conversation and even laughter. It would have been warmer and drier in those days, too, he knew. The natural hot springs that were supposed to condition this region would still have been alive, supplemented by heatstones set into the walls and ceilings.

Now, though? So many of the hot springs and steam-vents had died over the centuries, their flow slowing gradually until nothing remained. As the Scytha Stair, and so many other regions of the large kaer, had fallen into disuse, the elementalists and other adepts tasked with maintaining the light quartz and heatstones had let their responsibility slip. Why waste effort recharging the magic in regions where few

ventured anymore, they must have thought. Now even the light quartz crystals were dimming, their light starting to flicker. Delain sighed. *I suppose I should be glad there's any light left at all ...*

Again he stopped, leaning against the chill stone wall, suddenly tired beyond his twenty-three years. For a moment, despair sang its siren song in the depths of his mind. So easy to give in to that call, as so many had already done.

***No*. With an effort, he shook off the mood that threatened to engulf him. He rubbed at the milk-pale skin of his slender face. *No*, he told himself again, more firmly this time. *Despair is not for me*. And he began to climb again.**

He'd miscounted the flights of stairs again, Delain realized at once as he pushed open the door and stepped through from the stairwell. This wasn't the Level of Astendar, but the Level of Vestrial. Distracted, he'd climbed one flight too many.

It would take only moments to return to the Scytha Stair, to descend the one flight to his destination. But suddenly he felt a strong aversion to the emptiness of the deserted Stair. Loneliness wasn't--*shouldn't* be--a common experience in the closed confines of the kaer, but that was the sensation spreading through Delain's soul. Instead of returning to the Stair, he followed the narrow corridor forward, toward the center of the kaer. He would cut through the High Concourse, he decided, then down the Great Gyre. It would add a few minutes to his journey, but at the moment that mattered less than his desire for contact: the feeling of others around him. The feeling of not being *alone*.

Dust gritted underfoot as he strode through the residential area, his long legs and quick stride eating up the distance. Doors gaped on both sides of the corridor, opening onto blackness. These were private quarters, once filled with the friendly hustle and bustle of family life; deserted now. He quickened his pace even further, suddenly aching to get out into the crowded Concourse. He pushed open the door at the end of the corridor, hearing the rust creak in the hinges.

The light was almost painful after the pinky-red dimness of the Stair and the deserted hallway. The crystals of light quartz were well-tended here--thank the Passions--freshly recharged and burning with the friendly yellow glow that mimicked the noonday sun. Or, at least, the way he imagined it from the descriptions in the old tales and lays.

The high-ceilinged Concourse was alive with traffic, echoing with the scuff of shoes on the stone floor, the murmur of conversation. Delain felt his face twist into a smile of relief as he stepped around a pair of women engrossed in conversation, discussing the minutiae of day-to-day life. He breathed deeply, taking in the familiar smells of the populace: the musk of sweat, the tang of smoke from cookfires, the sharp bite of spices. *Much better than the dry, desolate odor of dust*. Delain stepped out into the flow of passersby, letting it carry him along like a river.

"As the night follows the day, and rest labor, so Death comes as a balm to the sore at heart ..."

He stopped in his tracks, frozen by the ringing voice that echoed through the Concourse from behind him. The dull tolling of an iron bell punctuated the recitation, silencing all conversation around him. He turned.

The funerary procession was twenty paces away, passing slowly through the crowds that opened before it. At its head was an aged man, his unrelieved gray robes identifying him as a questor of Dis, the Passion of Order and Community. In his withered hands he held aloft a forked staff atop which hung the iron bell that tolled echoingly with each step. A step behind him, one to each side, were the fire-bearers dressed in simple white robes, each carrying a wrist-thick candle. The flames burned sullenly, guttering slightly in the air currents.

Another step back was the troubadour whose voice he'd heard. Delain recognized her, of course. Marta, her name was, attractive in a rather severe way, straight black hair pulled back from a high forehead, blue eyes glinting in the light of the fire-bearers' candles. In slender hands she held a lute. Its strings were silent, as if she had decided its clear notes would be inappropriate to the moment.

And behind her came the bier itself, carried by four bearers. The body was draped neck-high with the traditional shroud of cotton--once white, now the color of old bone. A family heirloom? Delain wondered. How many generations did that shroud date back? Almost involuntarily, he took a step forward, to get a better look at the body.

A dwarven woman, he saw, in her middle years as that race measured things ...

No, he corrected instantly, younger than that. Forty-five at the latest. It was the sunken, care-worn face that had deceived him, seeming to add three decades to the dead woman's appearance. Even in death, her face was drawn in ... what? Exhaustion? Despair? He couldn't tell.

A respectful step behind the bier strode another dwarf--male this time, and this time definitely in his middle years. His dark eyes were downcast, fixed on the small earthenware bowl he carried before him. A bowl of dust, Delain knew, the eternal symbol of loss and death. The dwarf's grief hung about him, like a heavy winter cloak about his shoulders. The dead woman's husband, of course. And behind the dwarf ...

Nobody. The procession ended there. No friends, no family members sharing his grief. Why not?

"As we go to our eternal rest, we do so in the knowledge that we follow the Cycle of the seasons, of day and night." Marta's voice rang out clear and true--not loud, but carrying nonetheless. "Why strive against the dying of the light, the setting of the sun?"

For a moment, Delain closed his eyes, concentrating on the other troubadour's voice. Her technique was excellent, her diction almost perfect, handling the complex scansion of the ancient dwarven dialect without flaw, turning the internal scansion and multiple stresses into music. Grais would approve, he decided, thinking of his uncle and master in the High Art. Now he let his attention shift, from voice and technique to the words the young woman was reciting.

"Hearth and home, all shall pass, until nothing remains. What shall we hold to, then? Strife and struggle, all come to naught. There is no victory, no defeat, as the Cycle turns. Set them aside, as we set aside the striving itself."

Delain recognized the words, of course. The *Canon of the Cycle*, that was what Marta was reciting. Or--now he frowned--a version of the *Canon of the Cycle*, at least. The version he'd learned from Grais, the version he'd committed to memory almost a decade ago, was different. Subtly so, but *significantly* so, he thought. Mentally, he cataloged the differences. Only a word here, a short phrase there, no more than a slight change of emphasis, but to his trained ear and mind it made all the difference in the world.
The *Canon of the Cycle* offers comfort, he told himself, comfort to the bereaved, reassurance to those left behind. Or, it should ...

But *this* version, the one ringing from Marta's lips? Was it comfort that the words carried, or fatalism? Acceptance, or abnegation--abdication of responsibility? Silently, he reframed the stanza Marta had just recited, repeating it in the words he'd taken to heart. *Strife and struggle, all* results *come to naught. There is no victory, no defeat, as the Cycle turns. Set them aside, knowing that the struggle itself is all*. Didn't that encapsulate the flow of life better? When we die, success and failure are meaningless ... except as the struggle itself had ennobled us. That was the core sentiment of the version Delain knew. A message of hope, not one of despair.

Opening his eyes, he shook his head. He knew Marta. Kaer Moar was small, after all, and there weren't that many troubadours in the community. And even fewer now than once there were, but he pushed aside that painful thought. What Delain *hadn't* known was that she was one of the "doomsayers"--the name he and his uncle had given to members of a different "school" of the High Art. At some time in the past, some point in the history of Kaer Moar, there'd been a schism of some kind-so long ago that none alive remembered how it had happened, or what had caused it. From that time forward, the two "schools" seemed to have recalled the old words differently. The *Canon of the Cycle*, for example. The "doomsayers" now learned, recited, and taught different--*darker*--versions of the old lays and sagas and songs, while Grais, Delain, and the others held to the *true* words ...

Delain chuckled softly at that last thought. Of course *we* think we're holding to the true words, he told himself. Just as Marta and the others think *they're* holding to the truth, and it's we who've lost our way. He shook his head. How could one ever tell *which* was the truth, and which a corruption of the meaning? Come to think of it, if *both* schools were teaching corruptions of the ancient ways, how could one ever know *that* for sure? The troubadours were the guardians of knowledge, of truth. That was their duty, their responsibility. It was the troubadours who conserved knowledge of the past. They were the memory of the society, its soul. Such was their burden, and their reward.

So what was the result when two groups of troubadours remembered the past *differently?* Where did the truth lie?

The funerary procession had passed by, wending its slow way toward the Great Gyre. The questor would lead the procession down into the depths of the kaer, down to the Level of Dis, six turns of the great stairway below. There, in the Chamber of Passage, the body would be prepared for its final journey. Ritually cleansed and wrapped in simple cloth, it would then be taken to the Necropolis--the City of the Dead--that countless generations had extended into the living rock surrounding the Level of Dis. There it would be interred, with great and solemn dwarven ritual, in one of the Sleeping Chambers set into the stone walls. The woman's closest kin--probably the husband who followed her so sadly, Delain thought--would then close the Chamber, installing the "death window" of quartz that would allow future generations to view the face of their dead ancestor. Finally, a wizard or nethermancer would seal the Chamber for eternity, weaving into the rock magical patterns to guarantee that the body would remain undisturbed--by mortal, or by Horror--forever more.

Delain felt a presence beside him, felt someone brush against his hip. He turned.

The dwarf who'd come up alongside him was old and weathered. Well past his century, Delain realized, old even by the standards of his race. The dwarf's deep-set eyes were rimmed with red, tears tracing down his cheeks, following the lines graven deep into his face like rain following the course of rivers toward the sea. Grief seemed to emanate from him in palpable waves.

"Do you know her?" Delain asked gently.

The old dwarf started, looking up sharply as though he hadn't been aware of the young human's presence. His leathery face twisted into a scowl, but then his eyes touched on the small harp hanging on its worn strap over Delain's shoulder. The dwarf's expression softened. "Aye," he admitted, his voice rough as the rattle of rocks in a helmet. "Aye, I knew her. Tevra Neden, her name is. Tevra Neden Rockharrow. My daughter's daughter-in-law."

Delain felt his eyebrows arch in surprise. He glanced at the husband following, hunch-shouldered, behind the bier. "Your grandson?" he asked, confused. "Then why ...?" With an effort, he stilled the question he wanted to ask.

Even in his sadness, the old dwarf's lips quirked upward in a bitter smile. "Then why do I not join my

grandson in his grief?" His momentary smile faded. "It would not be meet to do so," he said quietly.

"But *why?*"

For an instant the dwarf's dark eyes turned hard as sharpened flint. With a thick forefinger he reached out and gently touched Delain's harp. "Troubadours often ask more than others are willing to tell," he said. But then expression and voice softened once more. "But I'll tell ye ... because I need to tell *someone*." He squared his broad shoulders, dropping his gaze to the receding procession.

"A stillbirth," he said quietly, his voice as bleak as a breeze from the empty depths of the kaer. "Another stillbirth. Her third. Three more than *any* woman should have to face. Three more than any woman *could* face."

Delain nodded slowly in saddened understanding. "She took her own life ..."

"Aye." The dwarf nodded once and smiled bitterly. "Perhaps she wanted to ask Dis in person why she should be so afflicted."

Again his smile faded as if it had never been, and he shook his large head. "Kolban says there's no shame in taking your own life. Some of the troubadours echo him." He shrugged. "But I hold to the old ways. In this, at least."

"I understand," Delain said softly. It was an old belief among traditional dwarven families--and clan Rockharrow was one of those--that to take one's own life was one of the greatest shames a dwarf could bring to his name. Spurning the gift of life, that was how the old dwarven teaching-poems described it. Delain looked one last time at the retreating back of the husband--the grandson of the dwarf beside him. He shook his head sadly, sharing the grief of the couple's three stillbirths. Three children, but all born dead.

When he turned back, the dour old dwarf had already vanished into the crowds.

"Kept you waiting, have I?"

Delain looked up at the booming voice, quickly closing the small stone-bound book and returning it to his shoulder-pouch. With a smile, he pushed himself up from the cold stone bench where he'd been waiting. "Not that I noticed," he replied lightly.

Grais Evenstar looked down at him from his six-foot-three height. Here, outside the Council chamber, the corridors of the kaer had been built closer to dwarven proportions, and his bald head--like old leather, wrinkled then stretched once more over his domed skull--almost brushed the ceiling. His green eyes glittered, and beneath a thick mustache his mouth twisted into a familiar grin. He nodded at his nephew's shoulder-pouch, indicating the book he'd just put away. "Getting in some more time on the journeyman-piece?"

Delain just smiled.

"Sometimes I don't know why ..." Grais began, then cut off the thought with a rueful shake of his head. "Never mind," he said. "We can go around about that again later."

Delain chuckled. "I know we will." He settled harp and shoulder-pouch more comfortably as he fell into step beside his uncle. Delain usually had to rush to keep up with him; but this time the big man was walking slower than was his wont. "Hard day?" he asked quietly.

Grais snorted. "No harder than any other." Then he added, "But that's not saying much, not these days."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, wending their way through the administrative "heart" of the kaer, toward the Great Gyre that would take them down to their quarters on the Level of Lochost. The corridors and hallways were nowhere near as crowded as the High Concourse had been, one level above, and the dull hum of conversation--the "music of the kaer", Grais called it--was much softer. Soft enough that Delain had no trouble hearing his uncle's sigh.

"The Council?" the young man asked carefully.

The older troubadour's brows creased. "The Council is paralyzed," he said flatly, his powerful voice hushed to keep his words between the two of them.

"Disagreements?"

Grais shook his head in disgust. "Everyone can see the dangers. They see how bad things are going. On *that* point, there's no shortage of agreement.

"But when it comes to deciding what to do?" He snorted again violently, blowing his mustache out as a visual punctuation to his words. "Sometimes I think that if the Council table itself were to catch fire, we'd not see a majority voting for putting it out." His smile--usually an expression of a kind of fierce joy--turned bitter. "They'd refer it to committee, and take it under advisement. And in two weeks, maybe they'd install a Sub-Committee for Flammable Substances to kick through the ashes."

Delain couldn't help but smile, despite the seriousness of his uncle's words. "But at least they do recognize there's a problem," he pointed out. "They wouldn't have seen even *that* much, if not for you."

"Nonsense. All I did was hasten the inevitable."

Delain nodded silently, but he knew Grais appreciated the vote of confidence.
At the next cross-corridor, they turned right, into a lesser-used region of the Level of Astendar--a short-cut to the Great Gyre that would take them past the usually packed Hall of Princes. For the second time in under an hour, Delain felt gritty dust under his boot-soles. Scowling, Grais reached out and tapped one of the light quartz crystals mounted in the walls. It burned with a flickering, red-tinged light, not the normal bright yellow. Then Delain saw that all the light quartz crystals were the same along this stretch of corridor.

"Who's responsible for maintenance these days?" he asked.

"Voth." Grais named one of the older members of the Council, his voice turning the name into a curse. "He took on the responsibility at year-turn. All the maintenance committees report to him.

"*Maintenance committees*. Pah! More damned committees! More people talking about doing work and nobody *doing* it." Grais paused. "What are the people saying?" he asked his nephew. Then he snorted yet again. "I remember when I didn't have to ask, when I knew for myself." His brow and bald head wrinkled as his scowl deepened. "Maybe I'm turning into what I despise. I spend more time talking to *committees*"--again the word became a curse--"than I do anything else."

"I saw a funerary procession today," Delain said after a moment. "Tevra Neden Rockharrow. Did you know her?"

"I know the Rockharrows," Grais said. "An old line. Good blood. 'The true blood of Throal flows in their veins'," he added, quoting an ancient dwarven phrase of tribute. "What happened to her?"

"Stillbirths. Three of them. After the last, she took her own life."

The cadence of Grais's step faltered, but he didn't speak, so Delain left it at that. They walked on in a shared, disconsolate silence.

At least the light quartz stones on the Great Gyre are still bright, Delain thought. Winding the full height of the kaer, the great, wide, sweeping spiral stairway rang with conversation and the sound of countless footfalls. Oil lanterns burned in sconces on the wall, their smokeless flames kept alive more out of tradition than because of the need for additional light. Flickering lantern-light cast shifting shadows on the faces of those he passed.

Grais had taken up his usual purposeful stride, and now the younger man had to hurry to keep up. Around the great spiral they wound, four times, finally reaching the broad landing that opened out onto the Level of Lochost.

"What of that fool Kolban?" Delain asked suddenly.

Grais stopped in his tracks, fixing his nephew with a sharp glare. Then he glanced around him--nervously, almost, Delain thought--at the people passing by. He took his nephew's upper arm in a firm grip. "There are certain things you don't repeat. Certain things you don't say of Kolban," Grais hissed sharply, then added, "Even if they are true." He shrugged. "Kolban is being Kolban," he allowed guardedly after a moment. "And that's all I want to say about it."

Again they walked on, down the main radial passageway toward their private quarters.

"I'm for a rest," Grais said at last, as they approached the door of the four rooms they shared. "I feel like I need to stare at the inside of my eyelids for a while.

"And you?" His grin was back. "Work on the journeyman-piece?"

Delain shrugged, matching the older man's smile. "I'm for a walk," he announced, mimicking his uncle's tone.

"No work, then?"

"I can think just as well when I'm walking. Better, maybe." Delain chuckled lightly. "Who knows, maybe I'll overhear something I can use."

"Overhear, yes." Grais's face set into somber lines again, and he lowered his voice. "What tales have you heard in the corridors?"

Delain hesitated. Then, "There are some things *I* don't like to repeat," he murmured. He watched as his uncle nodded agreement.

"I'll meet you back here after evenfeast and we can talk about it then," he said after a moment, then let his lips quirk into a smile. "If you're not still asleep, that is."

"'Still asleep,' is it?" Grais demanded mock-sternly. "What kind of master would I be if I slept through my apprentice's clumsy attempts to learn the High Art?" Then his manner changed, and something like true concern showed in his eyes. "Mind yourself, Delain," he said softly, and he patted his nephew gently on the shoulder. "May you touch the hand of Astendar."

"May you also." Delain echoed back the ancient invocation, meaning it. He watched silently as his uncle vanished into their shared quarters, shutting the carved stone door behind him.

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Two

It was quiet this deep in the kaer. Quiet, and calming. Although she'd never feel comfortable admitting it to anyone, Karena Hearthrock relished that stillness sometimes. It gave her space to think. Space to let feelings run their course, unhindered by other people. Space to come to terms with thoughts that, under other circumstances, might disturb or anger her. It was important to the dwarf to do that.

Down here in the Unnamed Levels--the floors of the kaer below the Level of Raggok--she could walk, sometimes for hours, without seeing another living person. Which was convenient. It meant she needn't go down to the Closed Levels, the areas beneath the Unnamed Levels, when she needed time alone. By all the Hells, she *would* have gone if she'd had to, injunctions and taboos and curses be damned. Horrors take the consequences, she'd have *gone*. It simply turned out that she didn't have to.

Karena paused for a moment to adjust the wick on her oil lamp, to turn down the guttering flame. She didn't need that much light--her eyes were sharp, like those of all dwarfs, after all--and a large flame would burn oil too fast. When she was satisfied, she settled the carry-stick back on her shoulder, so the chain-suspended lantern hung behind and slightly above her head. That way it gave maximum light to what was ahead, without dazzling her.

The first time Karena had come down here to the Unnamed Levels, she hadn't bothered with a lantern at all. She'd simply depended on her own dwarven vision, confident that it would serve her as well in the bowels of the kaer as it did in the occupied areas. Arrogance, of course. She hadn't realized what it was like down here.

Cold, for one thing. Not too cold for her comfort; Karena was hardy like all of her kind--and not one to admit discomfort, even to herself. But too cold to *see* clearly. Like hulking trolls, a dwarf's enhanced vision depended on differences in temperature ...

And down in the Unnamed Levels, there were no differences in temperature. Everything was the biting cold of old stone. She'd been as blind as a miserable human would have been in the same situation.

Still, she hadn't turned round immediately and gone back for a light. No, by the Passions she'd been *down* there, and she wasn't going to give in to something as trivial as not being able to *see*. Not immediately, at any rate. Tentatively, she'd walked away from the open door of the staircase into the darkness, mentally keeping careful track of exactly how far she'd gone and in which direction.

And she'd tripped over something. A Passions-be-damned cradle, by Upandal! She'd fallen flat on her fool face, and she'd broken her nose! Almost her toe, too, she remembered with a bark of laughter, when she'd tried to kick that thrice-damned cradle through the nearest wall. Only then had she turned around, cursing her way back to the stairway in the cold darkness, holding a rag to her bleeding nose, and fixing with a killing glare anyone who looked as if he were even *considering* making some remark.

"Well, I was *young* then, by the Passions," she growled aloud, fighting back a smile, and angered by the effort it required. "Scourge it, that was ten years ago. I was only twenty."

Karena had learned from the experience. Not only to bring her own light, but also that there was a big difference between the Unnamed Levels and the Closed Levels beneath them. She *had* dared the curses or whatever--on two occasions--to step over the discharged wards in the stairway, and to descend deeper into the bowels of the kaer. The Unnamed Levels had once been occupied. Indeed, Karena thought, they must have once had names too. In the early years of Kaer Moar, people had lived there. Leaving cradles behind them, she grumped to herself. And not too long ago, judging by other domestic items she'd found strewn around the deserted corridors and chambers. A century, maybe a century and a half. No more than that.

And the Closed Levels? Very different, those. They'd never been occupied, not since the kaer had been created. Apart from occasional--and illicit--visitors like herself, the last people to occupy the Closed Levels had been the artisans who'd constructed them out of the cold, hard rock of the kaer. Four centuries ago, give or take.

She'd *felt* those years when she'd walked the echoing halls of the Closed Levels, too. Felt them like a weight on her mind. Like a mental analogue of the mass of rock hanging above her head. Disturbing, in a deep-seated way. It would be too easy to let the imagination run away down there, in the Closed Levels. Too easy to hear the echoes of her own footfalls, out of phase with her steps, and interpret them as the stealthy movements of ... *something*.

Foolishness! She set her broad jaw, and stuck out her lower lip pugnaciously. The only thing she was likely to meet down there was some officious bastard of a gray-beard questor, keen to bring someone up before the Council. And not even that, she corrected sarcastically. Everybody's too caught up with the taboo to have the liver to go down there. Again she spoke aloud, her sneering tone echoing from the basalt above. "The *Closed Levels, oooh* ..." She laughed harshly.

How in the Hells had those taboos come about anyway? All the talk about curses--where had *that* come from? The lowest reaches of the kaer--now called the Closed Levels--hadn't been considered cursed at the start, they couldn't have been. Probably they'd been more a symbol of *hope* than anything else. Extra space--more space than the original population of the kaer needed. Room for the new children and new families, as the kaer's population grew. Promise for the future.

But the population *hadn't* grown, had it? Just the opposite. When the kaer was new, the Unnamed Levels--whatever they'd been called back then--had been in use. There'd been people living there. Not now. There was no need for those levels anymore. And even the occupied levels--the twelve circular stories named after the Passions, plus the four, smaller "element" levels that made up the peak of the kaer--weren't full.

Karena stopped, frowning. Was *that* why the Closed Levels were closed? Was that all there was to it? Just that they reminded people of something they'd rather not think about? Reminded people of a painful truth? She fought back the urge to spit with scorn. Could people really be that stupid?

***Maybe Delain would know*. The thought surprised her faintly. She hadn't thought of the troubadour-apprentice--hadn't *let* herself think of him--for several weeks now. Not since their last conversation, when ...**

***No! Scourge it*, no! She forced the memory away, back into the dark reaches of her mind where it belonged. *He hadn't even* realized. . .**

***Horrors take it*. She settled her carry-stick more comfortably on her broad shoulder. If she saw the young troubadour-apprentice--if she happened to run into him--*maybe* she'd ask him. Why not? What good would it do to spite herself, to deny herself something she wanted to know, to punish him for something he**

didn't even know he'd done? Yes, if she saw him she'd ask him. But she *certainly* wouldn't seek him out. Never that.

Whatever the reasons, the Closed Levels *were* considered taboo, cursed. And--if her speculations were right--eventually the Unnamed Levels would suffer the same fate, gain the same reputation. *Stupid*. Stupid to succumb to fuddle-minded superstition. By all the Hells, there were things of value down here in the deeps. She hadn't realized it when she'd first started her wanderings, but she'd quickly learned.

Things of value. Not gems or gold or antique weapons. Nothing like that. Value in a different sense. Some of the finest architecture in the whole of Kaer Moar, for example. In the guttering light of her lantern, she'd seen arches and portals and groined ceilings and embellishments that were classic examples of the High Dwarven style. In the occupied portions of the kaer, that elaborate kind of workmanship was limited to the "important" areas--specifically, where the self-aggrandizing Councilmembers lived and worked. Only the high muckamucks could enjoy the finest artistry on a day-to-day basis. In the olden days, though, the inhabitants of the Unnamed Levels had enjoyed it as a kind of birthright. Why would that be? Karena wondered idly. Because the kaer was constructed from the top down, and by the time they'd reached these levels the artisans had perfected their skills? She shrugged. Another one of those questions she'd never see answered.

But the complex architecture wasn't the only value from which the kaer's inhabitants had cut themselves off through superstition. There was the Hall of the Passions. A broad, high-ceilinged corridor flanked by statues--shrines, almost--dedicated to the twelve Passions. A wonderful place for thought and introspection, Karena had found. When she walked slowly between the finely wrought statues, she could almost feel the peace and the wisdom of the Passions themselves settling on her soul. *And now irrational idiots like Kolban write off this kind of spiritual wealth as ill fated?* Karena's thin lips twisted in a sneer. Morons!

The dwarf glanced down at the hand gripping the carry-stick. The knuckles stood out white, like bleached bone. With a snort of bitter laughter, she forced herself to loosen her grip. Maybe that peace and wisdom was something she could do with right about now.

The Hall of the Passions was the centerpiece of this level, exactly where the Great Gyre would be if it penetrated this deep into the kaer. That meant ... She hesitated for a moment, getting her bearings.

Yes. *That* way. Shifting the carry-stick to her other shoulder, she turned right and strode off down a broad passageway.

It was the sound that alerted her, not the light. The faint echo of conversation, of harsh laughter from ahead. Karena stopped, frowning. Carefully, she turned down the flame of her lantern. Yes, there was a flicker of light ahead, reflecting off polished stone surfaces, coming from the direction of the Hall of the Passions. Setting her jaw, she strode forward.

There were four of them. Youths, little more than children. Three orks, one human. All towered over Karena, though only the oldest of the orks came anywhere near her in breadth. In the light of two lanterns set on the ground, they were clustered around one of the statues--the one dedicated to Astendar, Karena saw--laughing at something. Distracted by whatever it was they were doing, they didn't notice her presence.

Until she hefted the carry-stick off her shoulder and brought its base down sharply on the stone floor. The youths jumped guiltily as the loud crack echoed from the arched ceiling. One--Karena thought it was the human, a girl and the youngest of the group--gasped aloud.

The four figures had drawn back from the finely carved statue. For the first time, Karena could see what had been amusing them. One of the orks was holding a stoneworker's chisel and a hammer. Seeing the

direction of Karena's gaze, he guiltily tried to hide the tools behind his back. Too late, of course. Karena had spotted the incriminating objects.

And she'd seen the ... *modifications* ... the youths had made to the statue of Astendar. A third eye, crudely graven into the forehead of the smooth, androgynous face. The lyre the statue held hadn't escaped their attentions either--the instrument had been coarsely modified into some kind of grotesque phallic symbol.

Through anger-slitted eyes, Karena glared around at the other statues. Two others, the shrines devoted to Chorrolis and Upandal, had been disfigured--*vandalized*--in much the same way. Her gaze shifted back to the four youths. She felt the hot churn of rage in her chest.

Three of the vandals were backing away--the human girl and two of the orks. The third ork--the largest, presumably the eldest and hence the leader--was standing his ground, though. Karena felt her lips twist into an expression that was a smile in name only. Slowly, almost casually, she stepped forward, her lantern's carry-stick in her left hand. Her right rested on her hip, conspicuously near the hilt of her curved-bladed sword.

"Fine day," she said lightly. Then, joltingly, she roared, "What are your names?"

The youths--even the broad-shouldered leader--started at the ferocity of her voice. Thin-lipped and pale, the younger three looked about to flee. Fine, Karena thought grimly, let them run. Let them run and get themselves lost in the Unnamed Levels. It would put a good scare into them and teach them the lesson she wanted them to learn.

"*Well?*" she bellowed. "*Names*, Scourge you! Forgotten them, have you?"

Karena saw the leader hesitate, his eyes flicking around wildly as he looked for an escape route. It took all her self-control not to smirk.

But then, surprisingly, she saw his expression harden. Squaring his shoulders, he took a step toward her, fists on his hips. "Our names aren't yours for the asking." The firmness in his voice was bluff, Karena knew that. But the bluff did its job, bolstering the fragile resolve of his companions, and reassuring him too.

Karena shrugged. "You'll tell me, or you'll tell the Council," she stated flatly.

Just the mention of the Council of Elders had the desired effect--on the younger culprits, at least. Their faces paled even more, eyes widening in alarm. Karena ignored them. They weren't relevant at the moment. The only one who was important was the self-appointed leader. The dwarf fixed him with her cold, gray eyes, watched as he tried to decide how to proceed.

"How are you going to take us all before the Council?" he demanded, playing for time.

Karena let her fierce smile broaden. Quietly, icily, she asked, "Don't you think I can do it, child?"

She saw the hesitation in his eyes. Deep down, she knew she'd won. He'll bluster, she told herself, but he'll back down. They all will. She watched, waiting for him to draw breath to argue. The moment he did, she snapped out, "*Names*, by the Passions!"

The self-appointed leader blinked. And then something happened that *shouldn't* happen. His expression hardened, his eyes turned as cold as the ancient basalt that surrounded them. "Get out of here, *dwarf*," he hissed. "Get out of here, if you value your life."

Karena almost laughed aloud. But then she saw the glint of steel in the ork's hand--a short-bladed knife

he'd drawn from his belt-sheath--and the laughter died in her throat. She shook her large head in amazement. She hadn't expected the youths to recognize her, but they must have seen the elaborate sword that hung from her belt, identifying her as a swordmaster-adept. *Drawing a knife on a swordmaster* ... It just didn't make sense. What in all the Hells was going *on* here?

And what in the True Names of all the Horrors was she supposed to do *now?* She couldn't draw steel on four youths--*children, for the Passions' sake!*--knife or no knife. If the ork came at her with his blade, she'd have no choice but to take him down bare-handed. But still, that was *much* further than something like this should ever go. Bluff--that was about all that was left to her.

She squared her shoulders, settled herself into a stable, broad stance. Both hands touching the hilt of her sword, she smiled up into the young ork's face. "Are you hungry?" she asked lightly. "I hope so. Because you're going to eat that knife, in a moment." And she took a confident step toward him, letting her smile grow even broader, as though she were enjoying every moment of this. "It'd be best all around if that blade were gone by the time I get to you." Another step.

Again the ork hesitated. His companions had backed away even further, a good four paces behind him. They were out of the picture in physical terms; Karena knew they wouldn't get themselves involved physically. But they were still there. And their self-appointed leader *knew* they were still there. She kept her eyes--cold, expressionless--fixed on his face. What's it going to be? her stare asked him wordlessly. Are you going to be smart? Or are you going to listen to your pride? Another step.

For an instant, she thought he was going to drop the blade, turn and run. But then she saw him swallow hard. Something shifted in his eyes, and he settled into a fighting stance. In the lantern-light, the knife blade--no longer than the width of Karena's palm, but still potentially lethal--glinted evilly.

***Scourge it!* Things were beyond the point where she could carry out this bluff alone. She knew that. But still she had to give one last try. She pointed at the human girl, watching wide-eyed from across the corridor. "You," she snapped. "You're responsible for telling his next of kin. Agreed?"**

And then she shifted her cold, hard gaze back to the leader. "I'm waiting," she whispered.

"Good day, all."

Karena almost yelped aloud in surprise as the cheerful voice rang out from behind her. She flicked a quick glance down the corridor, then quickly snapped her gaze back to the ork in case he tried to take advantage of her distraction.

It was Delain Evenstar. The troubadour-apprentice, by all the Passions! Half a dozen paces back behind her. In one hand he carried a small lantern, in the other his thrice-damned harp. He must have sensed the truth of the situation. Karena knew that troubadours were almost preternaturally sensitive to that kind of thing. Of course, the knife in the ork's hand also gave the situation away. Now that she was aware of his presence, she could hear his soft footfalls as he drew nearer.

"Good day, all," the young troubadour repeated, his tone of voice friendly and unconcerned. "Good day, and well met. I hadn't expected to meet anyone down here, but I'm happy for the company."

He was alongside Karena now, his presence surprisingly comforting. Some of that troubadour magic? Karena wondered sourly. Or am I just relieved to have someone share this with me?

"I always enjoy a visit to the Hall of the Passions," Delain went on lightly. "I'm glad I'm not the only one who still remembers them.

"Have you heard the story of the sculptor who carved them? Come, let me tell it to you."

The knife-wielding ork's face twisted in disgust. "We don't want to hear your thrice-damned story," he growled. "We've heard too many stories already." Voice and expression were fierce. But Karena saw he'd already lowered his blade, and had straightened from his fighting crouch.

Beside her, Delain shrugged lightly. "It's a fascinating tale, though." His voice was soft, musical. Karena felt it calm the anger, the tension, she felt. And not just *her* anger--she saw the set of the ork's shoulders change, as his muscles began to relax. "He was blind--completely blind, mind you--when he carved those statues."

"Blind ...?" one of the younger orks asked tentatively, and Karena knew that Delain now had the situation under control.

"That's what the stories tell," Delain confirmed cheerfully. "Vergis, his name was. 'Vergis the Master' everyone called him. Or 'Vergis of the Clouded Eye.' And he*was* blind.

"Not from birth, of course," Delain went on, his soft voice weaving a web of calm throughout the hallway. "But his eyes had last seen the light a full thirty years before he began to shape the sculptures in this chamber. Amazing, isn't it? All this work"--he gestured around him--"all this fine work, performed by someone who couldn't see the tip of his chisel or the surface of the stone. Someone who couldn't work from a model or a drawing, but could only visualize the finished form in his mind. And yet *look* at his work. The fineness of texture, the delicacy of line. Could any of *us*--with full sight, mind you--create anything of its like? I know *I* couldn't.

"Yet, there were many people who said that only a blind master *could* have created something of this beauty, this perfection," Delain continued gently. "When our kaer was new, many people believed that. Can you think why?" And then he waited.

It was the human girl who answered tentatively. "Because ... because he wasn't distracted by what he saw with his eyes?"

Delain smiled broadly, delighted. "*Exactly!* Vergis the Master wasn't distracted by what *was*, he saw only what *could be*. He didn't see with his eyes, he saw with his *heart*. And that's what allowed him to create perfection." He hooded his eyes and bowed his head--almost ritualistically, Karena thought. "There it ends, for such is the truth of the thing." A moment later he looked up again, and glanced questioningly--innocently--at Karena, and at the ork who'd returned his knife to its sheath. "I'm sorry," Delain said lightly. "Did I interrupt something important? Pray continue."

"Uh, no. Nothing." It was all Karena could do not to laugh up into the young ork's face as his cheeks colored and he shifted from foot to foot in discomfort. "Nothing," he muttered again. His compatriots had already picked up their lanterns, and were edging toward the Hall's portal. Trying to cling to what shreds of self-possession he still had, the ork straightened his spine and strode off, the other three scurrying after him.

Delain watched them leave. As soon as they were out of sight, and their scuffling footsteps had faded, his smile vanished. Shaking his head sadly, he looked over at the defaced statues.

"Was that true?"

Delain turned at Karena's question.

"What you told them, about the blind stoneworker," she asked gruffly. "Was it true?"

"So the legends say," he said. Then he gave a small laugh. "Of course, if you look far enough, you're going

to find legends that claim the kaer was built by Upandal himself. It's up to you if you want to believe them."

For a moment, in the light of the lanterns, Delain's slender, fine-boned face looked ethereal--almost as preternaturally beautiful as the statues of the Passions. But then his lips quirked in a wry smile, and the spell was broken. "I thought you might be down here," he remarked. "But I didn't expect you to have company."

Karena blinked in surprise. "You were looking for me?" She tried to keep her voice casual.

He shrugged. "Well, yes. I was hoping you could help me out with something, Karena."

With a snort, she turned away, glaring fiercely after the vanished vandals. "You just let them get away," she grumbled.

"I know their names," he remarked. "Two of them, at least. The girl--she's Lutea Venn. And the big one, the one you were ... talking ... with--he's Gralnath Splittooth. That probably means one of the others was his brother, Marnath. The last?" He shrugged. "They'll tell the Council his name soon enough ..." He fixed Karena with a questioning look. "... if that's the path you intend to follow, of course."

"They can choke on *quaalz*, for all I care," she spat. Almost cautiously, she looked back at Delain. The moment was gone, the moment that had cast him in her eyes as an image of the Passions. Now he was just a youth--attractive in the pale, thin way of humans, but nothing overly special. She sighed. "You wanted something of me, Delain?"

He chuckled dryly. "I wanted to know if you'd heard any rumors about conflict in the kaer," he said. "I thought maybe you'd heard people talking. I didn't expect a front-row seat." He paused, and his expression grew more serious. "He had a knife, Karena. What would you have done if--"

Karena's bark of laughter cut him off. "I'd have taken the rotten thing off him, of course. Then I'd have knocked him down, and I'd probably have walked on him awhile to teach him a Scourge-touched lesson."

"You wouldn't have ...?"

"Drawn steel? On *him*?" With another harsh laugh, she spat on the floor by her right foot, an orkish gesture of derision. "Knife or no knife, he'd be more likely to hurt himself than anyone else. Nothing to worry about."

"*I'd* have been worried."

"If I couldn't handle a child with a knife, my master would come back from the grave to take his sword back." Karena turned away to scowl at the defaced statue of Upandal. "Still," she admitted softly after a long moment, "it *did* worry me. Not the knife. The fact that he drew it in the first place." She snorted. "If that makes any kind of sense at all."

Delain looked at her speculatively. "It makes sense," he said at last. "More than I'm comfortable with."

The dwarf turned her scowl on him. "You're not turning into another one of those alarmists, are you?" she demanded sharply. Then she whimpered in a cracking falsetto, "'Society is breaking down, we're all going to die, oh *save* me ...'"

The troubadour shook his head. "I'm no alarmist." He paused again. "But this *does* worry me."

"*Hmmph!*" Karena settled her carry-stick back on her shoulder, and started to turn away. "Sometimes I

think this whole place is Horror-touched."

With a surprisingly strong grip, the young human grabbed her arm. Startled, she turned back.

"Don't say that sort of thing aloud, Karena." His voice was low, earnest. "There are some who'd kill you for that."

Suddenly, irrationally, angered by his concern, the dwarf shook loose from his grip. "*You* heard me, and still I live," she grumbled.

"You know what I mean."

Again she snorted, then turned away and stomped off toward the stairs leading up. As she left him behind among the statues, her scowl deepened. The irritating thing was she *did* know what he meant ... and she agreed with him.

Gaylear Cleareye clan Granitebone drew the heavy bow to full extension. Held it, held it ... She felt the tension in the muscles of her back echo the forces in the hand-woven bowstring. Momentarily closing her eyes, she imagined she could *hear* the stresses in the complex recurved shape of the wood-and-horn bow. Her right hand nestled up against the side of her face, the thumb joint lightly touching the line of her chin. Slowly, the massive bow still at full draw, she opened her eyes and focused on the wooden target, forty paces away across the deserted chamber. From this vantage point, the five arrows she'd already loosed looked like a single, thick bunch of feathers in the center of the target.

Even though the great muscles of her back and shoulders were resisting the massive tension of the bow, Gaylear was relaxed, as relaxed as she ever felt, as relaxed as if she were dozing in bed under a thick comforter. The steady hiss of her breathing, the slow thudding of her heart ... she was aware of both sounds, but somehow they seemed distant--*removed*--as they always did in these moments.

Time seemed to slow around her as she approached the moment of unity--that's what she called it, at least--when she, the bow, the arrow, even the target itself, all became one unified whole. At that instant, if somebody had asked the troll where *she* was--where the part of her that thought, that felt, that *was* Gaylear Cleareye clan Granitebone, was located in space--she'd have said not within her skull, behind her eyes. No, she'd have said, in all truthfulness, "In the point of my arrow."

She didn't choose the moment of release, didn't make a conscious decision to relax her grip on the bowstring. It was as if the arrow itself made the decision, leaping from the bow between one heartbeat and the next. The bowstring sung like a harp, the limbs of the bow rung. But above both those sounds, the hiss of the arrow shaft through the air was the loudest sound in her universe. Before the arrow struck the target--even before it had crossed a fraction of the open space--she knew the shot was true. The thud and rattle as the wooden shaft drove into the center of the target, amidst its fellows, was an unnecessary confirmation.

Her left hand held the bow steady, the small "aiming dots" of inlaid stone still aligned with her aiming point. On release, her right hand had drifted back reflexively to stop behind her ear, her elbow high. Now she let out the breath she hadn't felt herself holding, and lowered the bow. She smiled in satisfaction--in sheer pleasure, to be honest--feeling the leathery skin of her face wrinkle into deep lines.

With a sigh, she set her bow down gently. Then she walked across the cold stone floor toward the target, past the chunks of light quartz she'd set down to illuminate the deserted chamber. She looked down at the wooden target, and her smile broadened. A perfect cluster, right in the center of the hand-painted goldmark. Even a human's small palm would cover the six shafts, standing out from the target. Carefully,

taking pains not to damage the delicate fletching, she drew the six arrows from the soft wood. She held the last shaft to her eye, sighting along it. Still perfectly true, she was glad to see, as straight as the day she'd shaped it. The "target head"--a simple, smooth metal tip, without the bladelike vanes of a hunting broadhead--was dented and notched from impact. But it was much quicker to mount another target head than to carve, true and fletch a new arrow. She grunted in satisfaction, slipping the arrows into the leather quiver that hung from her belt behind her right hip.

Gaylear stretched luxuriously, feeling the bands and sheets of muscle shift across her massive shoulders. Now that she'd relaxed her single-minded concentration, she could feel the warm spread of fatigue through her back and down her arms. *A good day's practice*, she thought, satisfied. Slowly, still enjoying the interplay of well-used muscles, she crossed back to where she'd set down her bow, picking up her fist-sized chunks of light quartz along the way.

With a quiet power-word, she quenched all but one of the stones. The heavy shadows of the Unnamed Levels, held at bay during her practice, filled the chamber again. The troll paused for a moment, looking around the vacant area.

A perfect place to practice, this deserted area. And not too far to travel from her quarters. Gaylear's smile faded as sadness twinged at her heart. What would Mother and Gran say? she wondered. Her mother and her grandmother--both archer-adepts like Gaylear--had been forced to delve deep into the bowels of the kaer to find places to practice their discipline, down to the regions now called the Closed Levels. Nowadays Gaylear had to go only a fraction as far. What about my daughter, should I have one? she thought grimly. Where will *she* practice the way of the bow? In the rooms and corridors where I'm living now? A depressing thought, but not such a fanciful one, she knew. The population of Kaer Moar was decreasing. Anyone with the courage to face *facts*--and not hide behind false superstition--knew that. What reason was there to think the trend would reverse?

With a deep sigh, she unstrung her bow, and carefully wrapped it in protective cloth. Rising, she cast one last look around the chamber. Then she started her lonely walk back toward the occupied region of the kaer.

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Three

Grais Evenstar sat back in the broad wooden chair, brow furrowed. "Truly?" he asked softly.

And that, Delain knew, was as strong an indication as he needed that his uncle was deeply troubled. It normally wouldn't even occur to the older troubadour to question the observations of his apprentice. "Truly," he confirmed.

"Would they have fought?" Grais fixed the younger man with his green eyes. "If you hadn't come upon them, would they have fought?"

Giving himself time to consider, Delain glanced around the book-choked common area of their quarters. His eyes settled on the iron broadsword--his father's broadsword--hanging in pride of place on one wall. "If I hadn't come upon them?" he echoed. "How can I know that?"

"Guess, then."

The younger man hesitated, unwilling to answer. But finally, "If I had to guess," he said slowly, "then, *yes*, they would have fought."

"And you're sure it wasn't your friend ... er ..."

"Karena."

Grais nodded. "You're sure it wasn't Karena who instigated things?"

Delain chuckled. "Sometimes I think Karena feels alive only when she's caught up in some argument or other. So if you're asking, *could* she have instigated it?, my answer would have to be yes." He sobered quickly. "But *did* she? She says not."

"And you believe her."

Delain nodded.

Grais sighed, and rubbed at his eyes. For the first time, Delain realized how tired his uncle looked. He knew the older man had been sleeping poorly ever since being named to the Council five months before. Delain often woke in the small hours of the night to hear his uncle pacing back and forth across the common area, but it never occurred to him that the pressure might be taking a physical toll. For as long as Delain could remember, Grais had always been a rock, possessing the constitution of a troll, the strength of will of a dwarf. Nothing could deplete his immense store of energy. Not even taking on the responsibility of raising his young nephew after his twin brother's accidental death. Delain was shaken to realize how

much it surprised him to see his uncle showing physical signs of strain.

The older troubadour reached over to the low stone table beside his chair, and picked up a parchment. He unrolled it on his knee as though about to read it, but then just stared at it unseeingly, tapping on the paper with a broad forefinger. "This isn't the first case of this kind I've heard of," he said after a long pause. "But I'd been hoping they were just 'corridor myths.'" He flashed his familiar crooked smile. "You know the kind of thing, something that happened to the brother of a friend of a friend ..." He chuckled sourly. "I suppose that's what I always*wanted* to believe they were." He sighed again, deeply. "Sometimes I think ..."

He cut off that train of thought with a shake of his bald head. "Never mind what I think," he said briskly. He re-rolled the parchment and returned it to the table. "I want to hear about your progress on *The Sounding of the Horn*. Did you clean up that problem in the sixth octavo?"

Delain raised an eyebrow. "I *have* had other things on my mind, if you recall," he pointed out wryly.

"Irrelevant." Grais's voice was firm. "If you're so set on holding to the fiction that you're still my apprentice, then I don't have much choice but to act like the master, do I? And a good master doesn't let his apprentice off the horn that easily, particularly when it comes to his journeyman-piece. Let's hear the sixth octavo." He sat back, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Well?"

"I haven't made much progress ..."

"Well, let's hear what you've got. Come on, *apprentice*."

Delain sighed expressively. He closed his eyes and calmed his thoughts, letting his mind fill with the musical cadence of the ancient High Dwarven dialect. Almost without conscious volition, he felt his posture straighten, his shoulders pull back to clear his airway and improve the resonance of his voice:

And on that day the horn will ring once more,
A true and limpid note of purest joy.
With gloried hearts we see the gate swing wide,
And feel the warming sun on skin that long
Has felt no touch but cold and ancient stone.
The horn, a song to rouse the soul,
Rings forth again, a melody to touch
The sleeping soul of ancient earth.

He paused, letting the words hang in the air. Then he opened his eyes and smiled deprecatingly. "That's all I have at the moment," he admitted. "Nowhere near perfect, but it's a start. I'll polish it later."

Grais pursed his lips. "Adequate," he judged after a moment, then amended quickly, "For an early attempt, of course." He grinned ferociously. "And since it *is* an early attempt, I won't give you too much trouble about line seven. Rings *forth* a-*gain*, a *mel* -o-*dy* to *touch* ..." He emphasized the scansion in an exaggerated, singsong voice. "You can do better than that, Delain, I know you can."

Delain smiled faintly. His uncle's voice and words were critical, but the true message could be seen in his eyes. Pride. Pride ... and satisfaction, Delain knew. High Dwarven was a difficult dialect to compose in--difficult enough even to *recite* it properly, without butchering the pronunciation and meter--and both troubadours knew that Delain's work was much more than adequate for an initial draft. Given the choice, Grais would have released his nephew from his apprenticeship years ago, Delain knew. He'd have named him a journeyman, and he'd be considering *The Sounding of the Horn* as his masterpiece. But for his own reasons, Delain hadn't accepted that. He believed that traditions were important. They were what held the kaer together. And to set aside any tradition--even one as seemingly unimportant as the apprenticeship for

a single troubadour--weakened the fabric of the kaer. It wasn't as if holding to the traditional path were holding him back in any way. Apprentice or not, Grais had already taught Delain the skills of a full-fledged troubadour-adept. The magic flowed through him, and he could bend it to his will. So why *not* follow the old ways?

Delain was silent in thought for a moment. Then he said, "How about this, then:

Rings forth again, a timeless song to touch
The sleeping soul of ancient earth.

"Much better," Grais said firmly. He reached out to the parchment on the table beside him, then seemed to think better of it. His green eyes hooded in thought. "Will it ever come?" he mused at last.

Delain blinked. "What?"

"Will it ever come?" his uncle repeated, steepling his thick fingers before his lips, staring off into space. "The sounding of the horn. Will it ever happen?"

Delain paused. By tradition, dating back from the day Kaer Moar was created, the Great Horn had only been sounded thrice since it was cast. Those three blasts on the great brass instrument had heralded the closing of the kaer, the shutting and sealing of the Dawngate against the coming Scourge. Though it hung in plain view in the Hall of the Dawning, near the Council chambers, it would only be touched and winded on the day that the kaer opened once more to the outside world. Using the horn as its central motif, Delain's journeyman-piece described that day. "The ancient tales--" he began.

Grais cut him off with an impatient gesture. "I *know* what the ancient tales say. I want to know what *you* think."

"What value would my opinion have? None of us can *know*, all we can do is make empty guesses. And where is the good in that?

"*Nowhere*." Delain shook his head firmly. "No, Grais," he went on, "the ancient tales, the old words ... they're all we've got to depend on. They're all we have. And *they* say the kaer will open."

"When?"

Delain quirked an eyebrow ironically. "While we're at this, do you have any other trivial little questions? Like the overall meaning of life, perhaps?"

For an instant, his uncle's eyes narrowed in anger. Then the tension drained out of the older man's face. Beneath the thick mustache, Grais's lips twisted in a rueful smile. "Maybe my nap wasn't quite as restful as I wanted it to be," he said.

Delain smiled, hearing and accepting the apology behind his uncle's words. "They're working you too hard."

Grais shook his head. "It's not the work," he said quietly, "it's the *thinking*. The *knowing*." He rubbed his sunken-looking eyes. "If I could just turn off my mind sometimes, just for an hour a day ..." He chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound. "If I could just *forget*."

Delain felt the chill touch of fear in his belly. "Has it moved?" he asked softly.

The older man looked up. "Moved?" he echoed. "*Fala'an*? The gauge?" He seemed to sink in on himself, as though his chest were suddenly hollow. "No, it hasn't moved." His voice was bleak. "Not a hair's-

breadth since I joined the Council." His gaze flashed, sharp as steel, transfixing Delain like a crossbow bolt. "And I didn't tell you that," he added gruffly.

"I know that." Delain drew breath to speak, to open up the discussion they'd run through countless times before, but then thought better of it. This was one of the few significant topics on which they disagreed. Or maybe they *didn't* disagree, but Grais was letting the strictures of the Council override his own judgment ...

The issue was the "gauge", of course--the magical device constructed when the kaer was built. For something so vital to the future of the kaer's inhabitants, it was a simple enough thing: a sphere of enchanted true earth, no larger than a human's fist, magically suspended over a dish of true water. Nobody knew how or where the concept of the gauge had arisen; none of the tales remembered by Grais, Delain, and the other troubadours of Kaer Moar had anything to say about its origin. Oh, certainly, there were "corridor myths" claiming the concept of the gauge had come from some ancient text--*The Scroll of Tomorrow*, or *The Book of the Morrow*, or something like that--but if there ever had been such a book, nobody alive today had seen it, had read it, or knew of its whereabouts.

In any case, according to the theory behind the gauge, the Scourge would end only when the level of magic in the world outside had decreased to such a degree that the Horrors could no longer thrive, and were forced back to their own plane of existence. As the world's magical aura waned, so too did the power of the enchantment in the sphere of true earth. As the power supporting it decreased, the ball of true earth slowly descended. Eventually, it would touch the surface of the true water; the two elements would mix, and neutralize each other. And on that day, the Great Horn would sound, and the Dawngate would swing open.

Except that, for some reason, the ball of true earth had stopped its slow but steady descent toward the surface of the water. Some time ago--Grais didn't know how long, and none of his colleagues on the Council would answer his questions on the subject--it had stopped, and had moved not a hair since. Which meant ...

Which meant *what*? By the logic that underlay the gauge, as the scholars of Kaer Moar understood it, at least, the only conclusion was that the world's magical aura had stopped decreasing in power. But what did that mean, in the overall picture? Was this just a natural pause in a longer process, a kind of temporary plateau in the ebb of magic? Or had the Horrors found some way of stopping--even eventually *reversing*--the ebb of magic? If so, would the Scourge never end?

To keep the gauge safe from accidental damage, it was locked in a special chamber deep in the heart of the Level of Astendar. Only duly appointed members of the Council of Elders were allowed into the room, to see the gauge with their own eyes. Up until two years ago, the Councilmembers had always reported the progress shown by the gauge. Not on any fixed schedule, but irregularly, when there was something significant to report. Even today, Delain could remember the celebration when the Council announced that the sphere of true earth was suspended a mere *two fingers* above the surface of the water. He had been only five on that day, but the event had coincided with his birthday and Delain had thought all the singing was for *him*.

But then, just a little over five years ago, the Council had stopped making their reports. Delain had barely noticed. Reports on the gauge's progress had always been rare, and irregular. After all, according to the old records, the Scourge wouldn't be over for at least another century. Neither Delain, nor any other inhabitant of the kaer, had considered the Council's silence on the matter of the gauge to be of any significance whatsoever.

Until Grais was named to the Council and found out the disturbing truth. The day of his appointment, he'd returned to their quarters, obviously deeply disturbed about something. It had taken all of Delain's persuasive talents to break through the older man's reserves, to coax him into revealing what had so

shaken him.

The gauge, of course. The gauge that should have been creeping down, marking off the days and months and years leading to the end of the Scourge. The gauge that had stopped some time in the past, and hadn't budged since.

The Council had initially decided to lie to the populace, to claim that the gauge was still descending on schedule. Eventually, the Elders had decided to end the regular lying, but not to tell the truth either. Best to say nothing, they had determined, best not to so much as mention the gauge, lest anyone figure out what was really happening. After all, what would knowledge of the truth do to the vital, and oh so delicate, morale of the kaer's society? As part of his appointment oath, Grais had been asked to swear not to reveal anything the Council declared to be confidential. It was only after he'd given his word of honor that he'd learned just what that oath concealed.

Should the matter of the gauge be kept secret? Delain asked himself for the thousandth time. No, he didn't think it should. Something so vital to the future of the kaer and its inhabitants--didn't the people of Kaer Moar have the *right* to know? Certainly, the revelation would be a brutal shock. Certainly, it would jar many people, undermine the assumptions by which they'd lived their entire lives. Yet, Delain believed the people of Kaer Moar were strong, stronger than the Councilmembers gave them credit for, stronger than they knew themselves. They'd weather this challenge, as they'd weathered every challenge they'd yet had to face.

What surprised Delain even more than the bad decision on the part of the Council was their belief they could *keep* their secret.

No family could keep secrets from its members. How much more difficult when the family numbered in the thousands? Because, after all, in a very real sense a kaer*was* a family.

The Councilmembers should have realized the word would get out somehow, *sometime*. Maybe not in its entirety, and maybe not in a form that reached everyone within the kaer. Word*would* leak out, though. Rumors, mutterings, corridor myths ... Incomplete, and often contradictory, but even more disturbing for all that. The Council should have recognized the inevitability.

And should have foreseen the effect the rumors would have on morale. Not simply from their content, which was disturbing enough, but from the implication they carried. *The Elders are keeping secrets from us. They're* lying *to us* ... It should have been obvious from the start that this realization would be the most damaging factor of all.

Well, the damage was done, now. The rumors were whispered throughout the corridors of the kaer. Doubts were in the wind as to whether the Elders were to be trusted on important issues. The Councilmembers themselves had chosen their course, and pride argued against changing their minds, against admitting the truth and explaining their reasons for concealing it. And Grais? Delain's uncle had sworn his solemn oath to keep the Council's secrets. Despite the damage the whispered rumors were causing, he was honor-bound not to take direct action.

And Delain was pretty sure he knew who had started those rumors. With a sigh, he shook his head. He suspected that Kolban Darkways had been the one who'd started spreading the rumors, but there was no way of proving it. Besides, it was too late. The damage was done.

Grais's voice broke into his reverie. "Have you heard of the Brothers of Night?" the older man asked.

Delain blinked in puzzlement. "An old poem?"

His uncle chuckled softly. "More current than that." Grais's smile faded quickly. "It's a ..." He hesitated.

" ... not a society, they're not well enough organized for that. More like a group. Mainly twilighters." That was the slightly derogatory term for older inhabitants of the kaer, those who'd started their downward slide into senility. "A few younger would-be mystics. Mainly people out on the fringe, nobody near the center of things. Not yet."

"So what *is* this group?" Delain asked.

"People who share a belief," Grais explained. "The belief that the Scourge will never end. That the Dawngate will never open. That the dawn will never come--hence 'The Brothers of Night', see?" He sighed. "That the Horrors have all the time they need to break down the kaer's defenses. That soon they'll penetrate the wards ... to enter the kaer and feed."

Delain shivered slightly at his uncle's bleak tone. "Stormcrows," he mumbled, using a widely used Throalic epithet for "birds of ill omen"--people who "borrow" and attract trouble. But then he shook off the feeling of depression. "That's nothing new, is it?" he asked. "There've been cults like this before." He shrugged. "Remember when that 'wise man' started preaching that the kaer would collapse with the turn of the century? That was more widespread than this, wasn't it?"

"True," Grais said slowly. "It's just ... *interesting* ... that this would arise now, of all times."

"Why?" Delain asked. "It seems obvious to me, with the rumors about the gauge, and all." He shrugged again.

Grais just looked at him with his sharp green eyes, patently unconvinced. He mumbled something under his breath, but all Delain heard was something like, *If that's all there was to it* ... Delain looked questioningly at his uncle, but the older man's expression was closed. Delain sighed. He knew Grais's moods well enough not to push the matter. He'd speak when he was ready.

Grais had reached out to toy again with the rolled parchment on the table beside him. "How goes your work on the fragment?" he asked, firmly changing the subject.

"Slow," Delain admitted with a wry half-smile. "I think I've translated all the words, but I don't feel much closer to understanding it."

"Where are you up to?"

From his voluminous belt-pouch, Delain pulled out his "working copy" of the scroll. Beckoning to Grais to join him, he unrolled the parchment and spread it across the table, using a sandshaker, an inkpot, and two stray books to hold the corners down. He ran his finger delicately along a line of blocky, ancient trollish characters, framed down both sides of the scroll with geometric embellishments. Above the original text he'd written in his tentative translation, using the familiar dwarven script. "Here's where I'm running into difficulty," he said, tapping a particular passage with a fingernail. Grais leaned in for a closer look.

The two troubadours had been working on the scroll that they'd come to call "the fragment" for more than a year now, though neither one knew exactly where it had come from originally. An ork youth had delivered the dusty scroll into Grais's hands, mumbling something about "finding it somewhere". He'd shrugged off all questions, finally changing his story to claim that he hadn't found it himself at all, that it had been a friend who'd passed it on to him. Surmising that the ork had probably found it on some illicit trip into the Unnamed Levels and now feared it would get him into deep trouble, Grais had sent him on his way with sincere thanks. Exactly where in the kaer the fragment had been found didn't matter much; what mattered was what the fragment*was*.

Delain and Grais had recognized its age--and hence its potential importance--at once. The parchment was

discolored and brittle. As they'd unrolled it for the first time, the fabric had cracked and split in many places. The writing--harsh, blocky characters, quite unlike the standard dwarven script--was faded, totally illegible here and there. Judging by the condition of the parchment, the style of characters, and the language used--a nearly forgotten troll dialect--Grais estimated the scroll to be more than three centuries old, dating back to within a few decades of the closing of the kaer. Immediately, the two troubadours had called in a wizard to magically copy the fading writing onto a new parchment, and to seal the original in crystal to preserve it. Unfortunately, the wizard knew no spells to bring out the parts of the text that had faded into invisibility over the centuries. Then they'd set to work translating it.

And that task was still not complete. From the start, they'd understood it would be slow going, but they hadn't known *how* slow. Over time--and three centuries was a lot of that--languages and styles of writing "drifted" and changed. Some of the characters had seemed meaningless at first, until Delain discerned how more recognizable characters had changed over time, and used those trends to "translate" the mystery symbols into something more contemporary. Then, once they'd made sense of the letters the scribe had used, had come the actual translation--another slow, laborious task. Even contemporary trollish wasn't an easy language, Delain thought. Status modes, protocol accents, relational prefixes, and all those Passions-be-damned irregular verbs! Why couldn't it be simple and straightforward, like Dwarven? To make it even more difficult, the fragment wasn't written in contemporary trollish, but in an archaic form of the language--formal, scholarly, stylistically intricate.

Delain, who took over the bulk of the work after Grais's appointment to the Council, eventually managed to translate the text into contemporary "common" Dwarven. But that didn't mean the job was done. The text was loaded with arcane allusions and cryptic idioms (and Delain could only hope they weren't the result of his translation) that concealed the meaning almost as well as if the scroll had been written in a private code. To decipher even a single line, the reader had to recognize and understand one or more obscure allusions--quotes from ancient sagas, references to half-forgotten myths, and the like. Without that, text was meaningless.

Delain remembered well a particular example. How many months had it taken him to realize that the phrase "Poliphan's chariot" referred to the sun? Only when he'd remembered an old elven nursery tale about a boy, Poliphan, who'd ridden the sun across the arch of the heavens, did the passage make the first bit of sense. Certainly, poetic allusions like this were common enough in other old works--the traditional version of *Jaron and the Sphinx* didn't make much sense to anyone unfamiliar with Theran poetry, for example. But the frequency--the *density*--of obscure references in the fragment was unheard-of. Almost as if the writer was as concerned about concealing the contents of the scroll as she was about recording them, Delain had thought perhaps a thousand times.

Over the last several months, he had begun to understand why ... or, at least, to guess at the reason. Unless his translation and interpretation were totally off the mark, the fragment referred to an event that occurred only two decades or so after Kaer Moar had sealed itself off from the outside world. Some kind of struggle between different factions, that's what the fragment seemed to imply. Not a quarrel within a single family or between family groups, but a schism involving a significant percentage of the kaer's population--and one that, if the fragment were to be believed, eventually came to violence. So far, Delain had found nothing within the text that explained the nature of the schism or the events that had precipitated it. Nor had anything he'd interpreted so far revealed how it had ended.

It had disturbed Delain--and Grais too, for that matter--to read about the schism. Not because such things didn't happen, or *couldn't* happen. To a large degree, Delain was surprised the pressures of life within the kaer hadn't spawned *more* violent disagreements. No, what unsettled the two troubadours was simple ...

This had been the first hint *either* of them had ever seen about such a major event in the kaer's history. Even now, months after the initial realization, the thought still disturbed Delain. None of the standard histories said anything about this--not *The Closing of Moar*, not *The Roll of Years*, not even the "unofficial" corridor doggerel that one troubadour passes to his apprentice. . .Somehow, the only record

remaining of a major event in the kaer's history was a moldering scrap of parchment, stumbled upon by sheerest chance. And that just shouldn't be the case.

Frowning at the copied fragment, Delain searched for an analogy that conveyed the depth of his concern. It was like realizing there was a gap in your personal memory, he decided after a moment. Like realizing you'd totally forgotten an important, *formative* event in your life.

Yes, that was *exactly* what it was like. After all, the troubadours had always been the memory of a society--a town, a nation ... or a kaer. It was they who gave the society persistence of memory. They recalled the history--not just the events, but their significance, and the interrelations between them. More important, however, they gave the society a continuity in its self-awareness. They reminded members of the society who they were, and who they'd been ... and illustrated how one developed inevitably from the other. *We are the conscience of our society, and--to a large degree--its soul*. He touched the parchment tentatively. *Yet in this case, we seem to have lost our memory ...*

"Where are you up to?" Grais asked again.

"Here." Delain traced a particular line with his finger, reading aloud, "'They met the mind-seed of Trian's son in Troubadour's Hold, and the wine of life flowed freely.'"

"'The wine of life'," the older man echoed. "Blood, maybe?"

Delain nodded. "That's what I think. Maybe a skirmish of some kind?"

"And 'mind-seed', what do you make of that?"

"Probably the same as you do," Delain pointed out dryly. "'Trian's son' had spread his ideas--planted the seed of his mind, you might say--among other people, and they followed him, or at least agreed with him."

"That makes some sense," Grais allowed. "But it leaves us with the 'who' and the 'where'. Who's Trian's son, and where's Troubadour's Hold? I've wracked my brain, and I can't think of any reference to a 'Trian' in any of the Theran, dwarven, ork, obsidiman, or troll poetry I know."

"In the poetry *you know*, that's the key phrase." Delain struggled to mute his triumphant smile. "But there's more poetry in the world than troubadours recall. Other disciplines have their rhymes too. We often forget that."

"Teaching rhymes, perhaps."

"Don't dismiss them," Delain cautioned. "Teaching rhymes contain more information than 'how to do it'. Names, for example. Old masters, people responsible for breakthroughs, ancients revered for their contribution to specific arts. Like Trian's contribution to nethermancy."

"Trian's a nethermancer?"

"One of the greatest, apparently," Delain said. "You should ask Ner Barthas about Trian sometime." Barthas was a dwarven nethermancer who'd recently ended his apprenticeship. "... But only when you've got a lot of time to listen."

Grais's brow wrinkled. "So a famous nethermancer's son ..."

"Not literally," Delain corrected, cutting his uncle off. "Trian died soon after the founding of Thera. There's no way his direct descendent could still have been alive when the kaer closed.

"But," he went on persuasively, "the word 'son' might be metaphorical: Trian's *spiritual* son, his son in a philosophical sense."

"A nethermancer himself, then."

Delain nodded. "And probably the same person as back here." He indicated another line, further up the scroll. "The one described earlier as 'Mynbruje's visage'. An old man, then, who's also a nethermancer."

Grais smiled appreciatively. "Good, good. Now what about 'Troubadour's Hold'?"

Delain felt his lips draw back in a broad, victorious grin. "The skirmish, or whatever it was--it happened right here, on this level." He chuckled at his uncle's quizzical expression. "Think about it, Grais," he said. "A large, open area on this level, a good place for a fight, if that's your intention. Just to the west of the Great Gyre ..."

Grais blinked, his face wrinkling in thought. "The Harper's Gallery, you mean?" he asked dubiously. But then his eyes widened in realization. "Which used to be called ..."

"Which used to be called the Gallery of the Harp," Delain confirmed.

"And what do troubadours hold?" Grais pointed to his nephew's instrument on its velvet-covered stand. "A harp." He hissed in frustration. "We should have seen that one at once." He clapped the younger man firmly on the shoulder. "Good job, that." His smile faded, and he went on soberly, "Which means ..."

Again, Delain finished the thought. "Which means we know for sure that this *did* happen inside Kaer Moar. I don't think we can pretend it's even *possible* that this might be referring to something that happened before the closing." He shrugged. "Not that I ever thought that was particularly likely."

"You don't have to rub it in." Grais sighed. "How much longer to complete the whole thing?"

It was Delain's turn to sigh. "How much longer to the dawn?" he asked rhetorically. "I think I know where to start on some of this, but ... listen to this." Tracing a line near the bottom of the parchment, he recited:

To follow the Four-Fold Way
And the stream of the ten thousand,
To see the Four Colors, to hear the Four Tones,
And to touch the weaving of the weaver.

"Scourge it, where am I supposed to start on something like *that* ?"

Grais clapped him on the back again and laughed. "Be sure and tell me when you figure it out."

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Four

Delain crouched in the shadows, watching silently. The air was cold; the stone wall against which he was leaning seemed to leech the warmth from his body. But still he remained perfectly motionless, fascinated by what he was seeing.

The large figure, silhouetted against the glow of the light quartz, drew the string of her massive bow back to her ear. Through the dry, still air, he imagined he could hear the recurved bow groan with the strain. The figure held the bow at full draw, seemingly with no effort. Then she loosed. The bow sang, and almost magically the arrow vanished, to reappear in the geometric center of the target.

Slowly, the figure lowered the bow, turning slightly in her stance. Now Delain could see the troll's face, could see the calm satisfaction in her expression.

Delain shook his head slowly. He recognized the look in the troll's eyes. He knew she was feeling the magic, feeling the adept's gift flow through her body. What she was experiencing was, theoretically, exactly what *he* felt when he wove a tale or a song that touched his audience's hearts and souls. He knew that look of quiet. Was "ecstasy" too strong a word? He'd seen it often in Grais's eyes, and knew his own must have shown it on many occasions.

Yet what did it *feel* like for the huge archer? That was the question. He knew what it was like for him, and, presumably, for any troubadour. The magic manifested itself as a sense of *belonging*, almost of *unity*. As he wove his song or saga, he could feel the interconnection of all those who heard it--listener to listener, and listener to singer. When he used his adept's gift, he could *feel* the society of which he was a part. Not as a theoretical concept, but as an *entity* with a discrete, individual existence. The pleasure, the peace, that he felt--they grew out of that sense of belonging.

What would they feel like for an archer-adept, then? That was the question. He'd never really thought about it before, never had *reason* to wonder how other disciplines touched their adherents. Now, though? For some reason, he felt the question was important.

The troll drew another shaft from her quiver, and fitted it to her bowstring. Her motions were economical, slow and fluid. They looked unstudied, but Delain knew that was a misconception. They were as carefully choreographed as the most complex of dances, made casual-looking only by the skill of the practitioner. Gaylear's sigh echoed from the stone walls and ceilings as she drew the bow once more. A timeless moment later, she loosed. Delain laughed aloud with simple pleasure as the shaft struck true, no more than a finger's span from the arrow before.

The troll spun in surprise at the sound. In the glow of the light quartz, Delain saw her eyes widen, but it was more like the guilt of a child caught breaking a parent's prohibition than the anger of a warrior.

Delain sprang to his feet and advanced into the light, showing his empty hands. "Gaylear," he said, smiling disarmingly, "it's me, Delain Evenstar."

Gaylear Cleareye clan Granitebone blinked her large eyes. "Delain?" Her tone was tentative, a strange contrast with her rather daunting appearance. She shifted her great bow from hand to hand uncomfortably, again like a child considering how to hide an incriminating object. "Delain," she said again. "What are you doing down here?"

Stopping at about a dozen paces from her, he broadened his smile and shrugged. "I thought I might find you here," he said simply.

"You ... did?" Gaylear was a good arm's-length taller than Delain, and almost twice as broad across the shoulders and back. The muscles of her upper arm were thicker than the young human's thigh. Yet still there was something about her stance that reminded Delain of a small child looking up at a parent in fear of punishment. A ludicrous image, but very real. At least I was right about her, he told himself. She doesn't know anyone's aware of her trips down here.

He shrugged again in answer to her nervous question. "Of course," he said simply. "Karena said you came down here regularly."

Gaylear blinked in surprise. Then her heavy brows drew down in a doubtful frown. "She did? When?"

"Not long ago." He hesitated. That *was a strange question to ask* ... "She knew I'd be interested," he went on after a moment, "because *I* come down here quite often, too. And I know she does--I met her down here just yesterday, as a matter of fact, over in the Hall of the Passions. She thought I'd be interested to hear of someone else who doesn't seem to mind breaking the taboos."

"You spoke to Karena yesterday?" Gaylear watched him a little skeptically from the corners of her dark eyes. "And *she* spoke to *you?"*

"Why wouldn't she?"

For an instant, he thought the troll was going to say something--to explain why Karena *wouldn't* have talked to him. But then she shook her head, obviously discarding the thought. "You're just down here for your own reasons, then," she said, a little more confidence in her voice.

"Well, actually I *did* come down here looking for you," he admitted. He held up his hands quickly, palms out. "Don't worry, Gaylear, I'm not looking to get you into trouble with the Council or anything." He chuckled. "Scourge it, I'd have to denounce myself and Karena--*and* some other people I could name--for the same 'infraction,' wouldn't I? And why would I want to do that?"

She looked deeply into his eyes, as if the truth of his words could be found there. Then she nodded, and she smiled slightly. A shy smile, almost gentle, despite her harsh troll features. She *is* young, Delain had to remind himself. No matter what she looks like, she's still only thirteen, maybe fourteen, years old. How sure of myself was I when I was fourteen? Not very, that's how.

He let his gaze drift over her, trying to see her with the "innocent eye" that was one of the first skills taught to would-be troubadours--the ability to see something familiar as if for the first time. She was huge--of course!--well over eight feet tall, and broadly built even by the standards of her race. Her hair was straight and ebony black, chopped off at shoulder length, looking almost as if Gaylear had done it herself with the dagger sheathed on her broad leather belt. The horns sprouting from her high forehead were atypically small, and almost symmetrical. The hardened skin of which they were made--*trolthelia* , to use the troll term--was still faintly pink, not yet having dried and hardened to the fibrous, almost bonelike texture found in older trolls. Her nose was broad, and somewhat flattened--almost as if she'd had a

difference of opinion with an obsidiman's fist, Delain thought, smiling to himself--and her mouth was wide and mobile, bracketed by deep creases graven into her olive skin. The tusks sprouting from her lower jaw were small, protruding beyond her lips by no more than the length of the first joint of Delain's smallest finger. (Would they grow longer with age? he wondered, remembering the terrifying visage of older trolls he'd met, with their tusks the size of sheath knives.) Her brows were heavy, and her eyelids slightly thicker than the human norm, making the eyes themselves look slitted, almost sloped.

Overall, though, her face was ... well, definitely not beautiful (not to a human, at least), and a long way from pretty. But, he realized, Gaylear *was* attractive in a way--in the true sense of the word. Her calm nature, modest to the point of being self-effacing, showed in her face. More true character than in the features of countless "beautiful" girls and women Delain had seen. The face she shows to the world is an honest one, he decided, a true reflection of the person within.

He hadn't known Gaylear for long. Within Kaer Moar, trolls were typically raised by their extended families, their *g'ralnakh* , and shielded by them from the rest of kaer society until their *tarr'a'on* , their "Claiming" or rite of passage to adulthood. Gaylear's own *tarr'a'on* hadn't been much more than a year before. He'd first met her when an elder of her *g'ralnakh* had brought her to Grais, to arrange for education in the Ways and Traditions of the kaer. Maybe things would be better if all families were so conscientious with their children, he thought suddenly, remembering the youths who'd faced Karena the day before. Delain had met the young troll a few times, and a tentative acquaintance--not yet quite a friendship, had developed between them.

Delain had never met any other members of Gaylear's *g'ralnakh*. That particular line-marriage within clan Granitebone kept to itself even more than was normal for trolls within the kaer. He had no way of knowing for sure, but he suspected her relationship with the remainder of her family was more formal than personal. And for the first few months after her *tarr'a'on* , she'd seemed to have no friends and only a few distant acquaintances outside the *g'ralnakh*. He'd seen her walking the corridors of the kaer on several occasions, totally alone, her massive shoulders drawn in, her back stooped, as if she were trying, vainly, to minimize the personal space she took up.

He didn't know how or where Gaylear had met Karena Hearthrock, or, for that matter, what in the name of the Passions they had in common. If he'd been asked to guess, he'd have listed the reticent troll and the cantankerous dwarf as perhaps the *least* likely two individuals to hit it off. Yet hit it off they obviously had. Karena and Delain were friends, though not especially close ones, and on the occasions when he'd met the dwarf in the corridors and chambers of the kaer, Gaylear had been with her. Maybe they were a good combination after all, he mused. Each had something to teach the other. Karena could teach Gaylear that it was all right to stand up for herself, that it was all right to have and express opinions. And maybe Gaylear could teach Karena that it was all right not to have an opinion sometimes ... He chuckled softly at that.

Gaylear smiled down at him, her worries about Council punishment for visiting the Unnamed Levels apparently set at ease. "You were looking for me," she said. Even speaking quietly, the words rumbled in the resonant space of her large lungs. "Why, Delain?"

He gestured to the bow she still held loosely in her left hand. "*That's* why," he admitted simply. "I know the pleasure, the satisfaction, your Art brings you. Karena told me." Again, something changed subtly in the troll's expression at the mention of the dwarf's name. He pressed on anyway. "I wanted to see it for myself. Now I have. And I want to learn more."

Her thick eyebrows shot up. "But you're a troubadour-apprentice."

"And you're an archer-adept. Does that mean we're not supposed to be curious about each other's Art?" He smiled ironically. "I don't remember reading anything like that in the Ways and Traditions, do you?"

"No," she admitted slowly.

"I'm curious, that's all. I saw the expression on your face when you were shooting," he said, indicating the distant target. "I saw the satisfaction, I saw the peace ... "

"*Jar'arak* is our word."

Delain nodded acceptance. "I saw your *jar'arak* , then. And in it, I saw a depth in the Art of the archer-adept that I'd never really considered before. I'd like to experience it."

The young troll looked skeptical. "It takes much time and effort to feel the *jar'arak* in the song of a bowstring," she rumbled.

"Of course," he laughed. "I understand that. Drawing a bow doesn't make you an archer, just as singing a song doesn't make you a troubadour.

"But I *would* like to draw a bow," he continued gently. "I *would* like to have the experience of loosing an arrow. I'd like to learn at least a *little* about what's involved. If you'd be willing to teach me, of course."

Gaylear looked away, almost shyly. "I'm not a bow-master."

"I know. But it's not as if I want to become your apprentice, after all." He chuckled. "Bow-master or not, you can show me enough that I'm not going to shoot an arrow through my own foot, can't you?"

For a moment, Gaylear still looked doubtful. Then a broad smile wrinkled her cheeks. "I think I can show you that much, yes," she agreed. "It's a good thing I brought my small bow today."

Delain glanced down at the bow the troll held in her large hand. It was a good five feet long, thicker than his wrist at its center. That was her small bow? "Good thing," he echoed.

Surprisingly gently, the troll reached out and took his left hand in hers. With fingers more than twice the thickness of his thumb, she manipulated his joints, gauging the size of his palm. Then she gripped his upper arm, her thumb and forefinger easily encircling his biceps. She nodded judiciously. "You *should* be able to draw the bow. Here, take it." Then, "No," she corrected quickly. "First, you need to get rid of *that* ." She pointed at the silver, largely ceremonial shortsword that hung at the belt of all Kaer Moar troubadours. "You don't want the bowstring catching on anything."

"That makes sense." He unbuckled his belt and set it carefully on the stone floor.

"Now try it." And Gaylear handed the bow over.

The bow was lighter than he expected when he held it in his left hand. He looked at the smooth surface curiously. It couldn't be solid wood, as he'd thought at first. Horn, maybe? Or maybe alternating layers of wood and bone? With his right hand he reached out and plucked the bowstring as he would the string of a lute. He felt the dull *thrum* of the fiber resonate through the limbs of the bow, into his left hand.

"Turn sideways to the target," Gaylear told him. "Hold the bow out at arm's length."

Delain did as he was instructed. "Don't I need an arrow?"

The troll giggled, a strange sound from someone so large. "One thing at a time, Delain," she told him. "How does the bow feel? Too heavy?"

"Not yet."

Gaylear nodded. "Now reach across your body with your right hand and grip the bowstring at its center. Use just your first three fingers. When you've got an arrow on the string, your first finger goes above the arrow, the other two below."

"That's not how *you* held it."

The troll looked down at her right hand, at the bone thumb-ring she wore. "No," she agreed. She smiled again, her shyness leavened with a touch of gentle mockery. "But you're not me, are you?"

"There *is* that," Delain allowed. He began to draw back the string.

Gaylear stopped him with a touch on his arm. "Not yet. You need to know a couple of things before.

"First, you need to know that a drawn bow is seven-eighths broken. When a bow's at full draw, be careful with it--don't bang it against anything, don't drop it. And most importantly, *don't* dry-fire it. Release the string without an arrow nocked. I've never had a bow come apart in my hand, but I've seen it happen. You wouldn't enjoy it."

Delain suppressed a smile. All tentativeness was gone from her voice, as if now that she was on familiar ground--talking about something she knew well--she'd forgotten to be shy. "I'll take your word for that. Second?"

"Second, you don't use the muscles of your arm to draw a bow." She hesitated. "Well, you *do* ... but the arm's not the important part. I want you to use *these* muscles, *here* ." She drew a thick forefinger across his back, tracing the large muscles of his shoulders. "Think of drawing your shoulder blades together, if you can.

"Third. You might have seen some archers draw the bowstring all the way back to their ear. *Don't* , this isn't that kind of bow. Draw the string straight back until your hand settles up against the side of your jawbone, *here* ." She touched the right side of his chin. "And keep your elbow up. It helps.

"And fourth: if the draw of the bow is too much, if you feel you can't hold it anymore, let it down without releasing the string."

"And fifth?" Delain asked.

"If there is a fifth, I can't think of it." Gaylear grinned. "Are you ready to try it?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Delain raised the bow again, sighting down his arm toward the distant wooden target. He couldn't wrap his fingers all the way around the bow's thick grip, but as he started to put tension on the bowstring, he realized it didn't matter. The pull of the string drew the bow firmly into the saddle between his thumb and forefinger. He found that he could relax his fingers totally, and the bow would still stay in place. He took a deep breath, and began to draw.

The muscles in his upper right arm started to quiver almost immediately. Scourge, he thought, it feels like I'm trying to pull a troll up the Great Gyre, and I've hardly drawn this thing a hand's-breadth. "How strong is this bow?" he asked.

"About a fifty-pound draw weight."

"And what about your large bow?"

The troll smiled crookedly. "Almost as heavy as you."

Wonderful, Delain thought. He strained against the bowstring, feeling the burn of fatigue in his biceps. After a moment, he let the bow down.

"*These* muscles," Gaylear said softly, again touching his back. "Try again."

With a sigh, Delain brought the bow up once more and took up the load of the bowstring. This time he focused his attention on the broad bands of muscles crisscrossing his back and shoulders, feeling the tension in them. Think of drawing your shoulder blades together, he reminded himself. He gritted his teeth and pulled.

The bowstring came back--not easily, but with nowhere near the effort and pain of his previous attempt. His right hand was eight inches from his chin, six ... *There* , his thumb settled against his jawline.

"Elbow up," Gaylear reminded him.

His hand was trembling, the fingers threatening to give out at any moment. Quickly, he let the bow down. With a sigh of relief, he worked the muscles in his right shoulder. "Hard," he admitted.

"Everything is at first. Try it again."

The next attempt was easier. His shoulders and back were already starting to feel the strain. But at least he had a better sense for the technique, knew which muscles he should be using. Again he let the bow down, and then drew for the third time. This time, his right hand came smoothly back, nestling up under his chin as if it belonged there.

With the bow still at full draw, he looked past the bowstring, down his extended left arm toward the target. He imagined the presence of an arrow on the string, the sensation of loosing and watching it hurtle across the chamber to bury itself in the wood circle. A little regretfully, he let the bow down again.

"Good," Gaylear congratulated him. "How do your fingers feel?"

Delain looked down at his right hand. The tips of his first three fingers were red, with bone white grooves graven into the creases of the first joint where the string had cut into his flesh. He shook his hand a few times to improve his circulation, feeling the fingertips tingling almost painfully. "A little sore," he admitted.

Gaylear nodded. "If you want to try this again, I can get you a leather finger guard." She smiled again. "And maybe a lighter practice bow."

Delain hesitated. He *did* want to try this again, he realized. He hadn't felt anything even resembling peace or *jar'arak*--he'd simply had too much to think about. But he *had* enjoyed the sensations of drawing the heavy bow and holding the string back. "I think I can get used to this bow, with a little practice," he suggested. "Could you teach me more? Not necessarily right now, of course," he added quickly, "but whenever it's convenient for you."

He saw a faint flush come to the troll's cheeks, and she looked away shyly. "If you like."

"I *would* like," he confirmed. He paused, then said, "Could I try actually firing an arrow now?"

It was Gaylear's turn to hesitate, frowning doubtfully. Then her face cleared, and her smile returned. "If you like," she said again. She held out her left hand for the bow. "Let me show you how to nock an arrow. Then you can try it yourself." With her right hand, she reached for the quiver behind her hip. "Now watch, there's a trick to this ... " In mid-sentence, the troll froze, statuelike, head cocked on one side.

"What ... ?" Delain started to say. But then he heard the sound, too, a strange hissing rattle. Like somebody pouring gravel onto a metal shield, he thought. He looked around wildly, trying to locate the source of the sound--difficult, since echoes from the surrounding stone confused the direction. He glanced up at Gaylear. The question on his lips died when he saw the faint smile of anticipation on her face.

"Watch," she said calmly. "I'll show you how it's done." And she nocked the arrow onto the bowstring.

"What *is* it?" Delain asked.

"Sometimes ... *things* ... come up from the Closed Levels," Gaylear explained. "Little scurrying things. I left them alone, until one bit me on the leg. Now they make good targets for an arrow."

The gravel-on-metal sound came again, louder this time. Delain still couldn't localize the source of the noise. Not so Gaylear, apparently. The troll turned to her left, toward one of the dark corridors leading away from the chamber. She raised her bow, settling the shaft of the arrow on the velvet-surfaced rest above her fist. She hooked her thumb-ring onto the bowstring, but didn't start to draw yet. Instead, Delain saw her close her eyes for a moment, as she filled her chest with a deep, cleansing breath.

And again the sound echoed around them. Doesn't sound like anything I'd call a "little scurrying thing," Delain thought grimly. Gaylear had been right about the direction, he recognized that now. Instinctively, he took a step back--both to interpose the troll's bulk between him and whatever emerged from the corridor, and to bring him closer to the shortsword he'd doffed. He saw Gaylear open her eyes, saw an expression of calm expectation spread across her face ...

And then saw her heavy-lidded eyes widen in alarm, heard her gasp a trollish curse under her breath.

Whatever the *thing* was in the open doorway, it wasn't "small" or "scurrying." Almost man-sized, it was, but nowhere near man-shaped. It was hunched over, like a man on all fours, but as it saw them it drew itself up to its full height. Limbs--*Not quite arms, but what* else *would you call them?*--moved sinuously. Wide jaws--mounted *vertically* , instead of horizontally--opened and clashed shut again. It hissed again, piercingly, and began to move toward them. Delain felt his muscles freeze, with fear perhaps, or something else. He couldn't turn, he couldn't run. He couldn't even bend over to snatch up his silver broadsword. All he could do was watch as the *thing* moved slowly toward him. *Like a fly trapped in syrup* ... "Gaylear ... "

The troll's breath sounded like a smith's bellows beside him. He saw her large hand tighten around the stock of her bow, but that seemed the only movement of which she was capable.

***"Gaylear,"* he gasped again.**

And something shifted in the troll's eyes, as though they'd suddenly turned hard as the cold stone that surrounded them both. A low-pitched growl rumbled in her chest, as she brought the bow up. Muscles rippling across her shoulders, she drew back on the string, slowly, smoothly.

The *thing* shrieked, a nerve-flaying cry of frustration--that was how Delain interpreted it, at least. Instead of its previous slow, almost sinuous advance, now it flung itself forward across the open space toward them. Delain gasped aloud as he felt the strange paralysis vanish from his muscles.

Beside him, Gaylear's bow sang, the shaft hissing through the air to bury itself in the *thing's* torso, driving it backward with the impact. Delain cringed, fighting back an almost overpowering urge to cover his ears, as it shrieked again.

The troll archer stood poised, still as a statue, her bow rock-steady and her right hand against her neck beneath her ear. Calmly, almost ritualistically, she took another deep breath as she lowered the bow.

"Gaylear, for the love of the Passions!"

The *thing* wasn't dead, wasn't even down. It howled its agony at the basalt ceiling, flailing its limbs wildly. Then it grasped the shaft of Gaylear's arrow protruding from its body, and snapped it off flush with its flesh. Its vertical mouth gaped wide, dagger-sharp teeth glinting in the gleam of the light quartz stones.

"Shoot it *again* , Gaylear!" Delain yelled.

Smoothly, the troll reached around to her quiver, extracting another arrow. She set it against the string, settling the shaft on the rest. With great care, she hooked her thumb-ring onto the string.

Too slow! Delain thought desperately. The thing was moving forward again--slower than before, but still faster than a walking man. *"Gaylear!"* he screamed.

The troll's eyes were wide with alarm. Still, though, she drew a calming breath, then another ... Going through exactly the same ritual as before, Delain realized with a chill. "Hurry!"

But she was *trying* to hurry, he knew, performing each step in the ritual as fast as she could. Finally the bow came up, and she drew the arrow back to her chin. She held the string at full draw.

Almost too long. At the absolute last moment before the *thing* was upon her, she loosed. From point-blank range, the arrow tore into the monstrosity's shoulder, ripping clear through the flesh, flaying it open to the bone. A mortal wound ...

Yet not instantly fatal. Howling its agony, the *thing* lashed out with its multiple forelimbs, smashing Gaylear to the ground with terrifying force. Her bow flew from her, skittering away across the stone floor. The troll yelped with pain and fear, as somehow she managed to get an arm up to block the creature's lunge for her face. Delain saw her thick fingers sink deep into its throat, saw her great muscles bulge as she struggled to keep its teeth from her flesh. To his amazement and horror, he saw her muscles tremble with the effort, saw her arm start to collapse.

***My sword!* He'd forgotten it in the heat of the moment. With a cry, he leapt for it, snatching it up. The hilt, wire-wrapped leather, felt alien in his hand, as if he'd never gripped it before. For a moment he hesitated, hefting the weapon in his hand, feeling the balance.**

The *thing* was still flailing at Gaylear with its forelimbs. She'd tucked her chin in tight to her shoulder, trying to shield her face from its blows. But that brought her head perilously close to its snapping jaws. In the glow of the quartz light, her face was pale, beaded with sweat.

Thinking back on it later, Delain would feel as though it were the sword itself that initiated his thrust. His mind was frozen with horror and fear, immobilizing him. Yet suddenly, before he even framed the thought in his mind, he was lunging forward, driving the point of the silver-bladed sword into the olive-hued flesh of the *thing* , throwing the entire weight of his body behind the thrust. The point bit deep, the blade sinking in to the hilt. Hot gore burst from the wound, splashing across his chest and face, stinging like acid where it touched skin.

The *thing* bent almost like a bow, arching backward unnaturally, like a man with a broken spine. Its limbs thrashed, actually gouging the hard floor. Transfixed, it flopped over, rolling off Gaylear. It landed on its back, driving the sword even deeper into its vitals. It twitched once more, rolling back onto its face. Teeth clashed one last time, and it spat a gobbet of bloody saliva onto the floor. A final shiver wracked the deformed body.

As he stood staring down at the still shape, Delain felt as though his body were wrapped in a thick

blanket. Physical sensations--the touch of his clothes against his skin, the cold air on his face--were distant, like the times when he was feverish. Sounds were muffled: Gaylear's stentorian breathing, a faint, rhythmic whimpering ...

He realized his mouth was open. He shut it, and the whimpering stopped. Tentatively, he reached down to touch the hilt of his sword. The creature's blood covered the leather grip, warm, sticky. He tasted bile in the back of his throat, turned away and spit to clear his mouth.

A presence was beside him--Gaylear. She, too, was staring down at the *thing*.

"What in the name of all the Passions *is* it?" His voice trembled as if his body were being wracked with violent shivers.

"I don't know."

"But you said ... "

There was an edge to the troll's voice, the faintest hint of a tremor. "I said things sometimes came up from the lower levels. *Small* things." With her hands, she indicated something the size of a yearling ork. "One arrow, always. I've *never* had to fire a second arrow into *anything* ." Delain saw a shudder ripple through the troll's large frame. But she had herself back in control an instant later. "No, Delain," she said more firmly, "I've seen nothing like *this* . Nothing even *close* to this." She prodded the still shape with the toe of her boot ... and recoiled with a hiss.

"What?" Delain almost yelped.

"It's decaying. Look, it's rotting away already."

The troll was right, he saw: whatever the thing was, it *was* decaying. Its olive skin had turned pale gray, and now patches of putrescent white were starting to spread across it. The thing's back looked smaller, too, almost as if its chest cavity had begun to collapse in on itself. The ichor splattered across the front of his jerkin, and coating his sword, had already dried to a black, crumbly material. On impulse, he brushed at the stains on his chest, and watched the material fly to fine dust.

"Your sword?" Gaylear suggested.

He nodded his thanks. He reached for the weapon, then hesitated, suddenly loath to touch the dried gore. Giving himself a shake to dispel his queasiness, he grasped the hilt, and pulled. The blade withdrew easily, with a sucking sound that turned his stomach. A puff of foul-smelling gas belched from the gaping wound and he stepped back hurriedly, fighting down an impulse to gag.

The putrefaction process was accelerating. Already, the flesh was starting to flow, exposing more of the thing's internal structure than he cared to see. He turned away, closing his eyes for a moment and wiping the sheen of cold sweat from his brow.

For a few more seconds, Gaylear watched the accelerated decay. Then she stepped away from the now-shapeless mass, and laid a large, comforting hand on his shoulder. "I am beholden to you," she said quietly. "I thank you for my life."

He shook his head, smiling. "Then I thank you for mine," he said. "Mutual debt ... which means no debt exists. Have I got it right?"

Gaylear smiled and nodded. "That is the way of my clan," she agreed.

Delain glanced back over his shoulder, one last look at the hideous mass starting to spread across the blood-spattered floor. "And you've never ... ?"

***"No,"* she said firmly. Then, more quietly, "Only small, scurrying things. Like rats, nothing more."**

Rats the size of a yearling ork, he noted mentally. He shuddered again. Is that why the Council's never categorically forbidden people to visit the Unnamed Levels? he wondered. Because they know Gaylear and others protect the kaer from "small, scurrying things"?

***And sometimes* more *than that* ...**

"The old tales tell of nothing like this?" the troll asked quietly, after a moment. He shook his head. "You're sure?"

"I think I'd remember," he said. From a pouch on his belt, he drew a hand cloth, and carefully wiped his sword clean ... or as clean as he could. He looked down at the soiled cloth, then tossed it in the direction of the decomposing body. "I can't believe it's natural," he said at last. In his own ears, his voice was as cold as a draft from the ancient depths of the kaer.

"And neither I." The fact that Gaylear had slipped back into the syntax of her native tongue told him how deeply this had shaken her.

Delain looked up into the troll's dark eyes, saw a reflection of his own fear. He came to a decision. "Come on," he told her, slipping his sword back into its sheath.

"Where?" she asked, but from her expression, he knew she'd already guessed.

The Closed Levels were even colder than the once-occupied regions above. The chill air stung the back of Delain's throat as he breathed.

It seemed somehow darker down here, he thought. He and Gaylear each carried a light quartz bright enough to dazzle his eyes when he looked directly at it. Yet for some reason, the light of the stones didn't seem to extend as far as usual, almost as if the darkness itself were striving against the light, holding it back. For the dozenth time in half as many minutes, he touched the hilt of his shortsword, made sure that it was loose in its sheath. Gaylear was a reassuring presence beside him as he walked on.

They were in the lowest reaches of the kaer, thirteen levels below Delain's home on the Level of Astendar. This was the deepest of the Closed Levels, and the largest--never occupied, never used, yet still arguably the most important level of the kaer. *Kha'averen* , it was called in the Throalic tongue--"The Foundation".

Delain had never set foot on *Kha'averen* ; neither had anyone of his acquaintance. There was no need to visit the Foundation, taboos or no. For all its vital importance, there was nothing within *Kha'averen* that needed attention from the Name-givers living so many floors above.

Until now, he reminded himself, and the thought was like a chill wind through his heart. He stopped again, holding the light quartz high and looking around him, matching what he saw with his memory of the maps Grais had shown him years ago. Yes, he reassured himself, they *were* on the right path, not wandering aimlessly through the oppressive darkness.

"This way," he said, his voice the softest of whispers. And he walked on.

The only sound down here was the hiss of their breathing, the scuff of their feet on the stone. Startlingly

loud, he thought, almost like a direct affront to the silence that's cloaked this place for so long.

Kha'averen **felt empty, as dead as most of the kaer's inhabitants had always supposed it to be. As I always supposed it to be, too, Delain thought. Well, he'd definitely been forced to reexamine that assumption. To get to the chamber where Gaylear had been practicing her archery, the *thing* must have entered the kaer from below. Which meant that any friends it might have could well be down here right now ... Yet again he touched the hilt of his sword, drawing reassurance from the solidity of the weapon.**

A minute later, the two stopped in front of an elaborately carved archway. In the light of his light quartz, Delain's eyes traced the complex, interwoven elaboration graven into the basalt according to the ancient dwarven tradition. He moved the light slightly, bringing a series of raised letters into relief. Silently he translated, the ancient words chilling him to the soul like an evil omen.

As I stand, then let the World stand. **So the words read, a quotation from a dwarven poem old when the kaer was new. The quotation referred to the kingdom of Throal, of course, and legend told that these same words were graven into the lintel of the almost-mythical Eternal Library. The craftsmen who'd embellished this archway must have thought the words would bring good fortune to the kaer. And until today, he'd have agreed with them, Delain thought sadly, reaching out to touch a webwork of cracks that were beginning to spread through the stone.**

"Here?"

Delain glanced up at the troll. "Here," he confirmed, and together they stepped through the archway into the darkness.

The chamber was small, much too small for somewhere so important, Delain thought. Circular in shape with a domed ceiling, it was no more than twenty paces across. The same style of embellishment he'd seen on the entrance archway wove across the entire expanse of walls and ceilings, seeming to shift and writhe like a basket of snakes in the moving fire of their pieces of light quartz. Delain took a deep breath, trying to slow the frenetic pounding of his heart. The air was slightly warmer than elsewhere in *Kha'averen* , he thought. Or was it just his imagination? Warmer or not, the air was still as death itself, as though nothing had ever stirred it. The sense of age was oppressive, almost crushing. It took all his force of will to shake off the feeling, and to step forward.

There it was before them, their destination, the goal of this tiny expedition. *Azhûn* , it was called in Throalic--a word translatable as either "center" or "crisis". It was small enough, perhaps the height of a man, and an equal measure in width. Carved out of the finest gold-veined white marble, it comprised four delicate semicircular arches--each representing one of the elements--intersecting each other at equal angles. The thickness and width of the individual semicircles varied along their span--smoothly, fluidly--adding a sense of complexity, of *motion* almost, to the structure. In the glow of the light quartz, the marble seemed to burn with its own pale, milky glow.

"G'ar," **Gaylear sighed beside him.** ***Wondrous.***

Delain nodded slowly. Yes, it *was* wondrous, yet in a way, also terrifying.

For *Azhûn* was the keystone of the magical wards constructed centuries ago to protect Kaer Moar. The threads and patterns of the wards' magics flowed through *Azhûn* , their anchor. In theory, the destruction of this delicate shape would cause the entire magical structure of the wards to unravel, as loosing the single key loop in a knot-woven tapestry could cause the entire fabric to fall apart. Here, at the heart of the kaer, was the center of its protection, the foundation of all that protected its inhabitants from the Horrors.

Azhûn **, Delain thought bleakly. "Center", and "crisis". How appropriate ...**

He reached out toward the delicate arch of marble as if to touch it, then drew his hand quickly back. What he saw shocked and frightened him. He turned slowly to Gaylear, who was also staring at the delicate shape with an expression of terror.

"I think we need to talk to the Council," he said quietly.

Gaylear nodded her large head. "And also I," she agreed. "And also I."

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Five

Delain shook his head in disbelief. "Don't you *understand?*" he asked again, bringing his fist down on the hardwood table. He felt tears of frustration stinging behind his eyes. "Can't you see? With things the way they are at the moment, we *can't* let word of ... of *this* ... get out. Can you imagine what the consequences would be?" He shook his head again, an image of Tevra Neden Rockharrow's funerary procession flashing through his mind. *If a stillbirth could make someone take her own life, what would this news bring?*

With an effort, he forced his churning emotions into the dark recesses of his brain, cultivating the careful detachment that was so vital for a good troubadour. Remember, he told himself, nobody ever believed anything because someone told him he must. He fixed his gaze on the Chair of the Council of Elders, an ancient-looking dwarf with a face like a clenched fist, then let his eyes travel over the other eight Councilmembers seated around the table. "Master Corbyan," he said earnestly, "I ask you and your wise colleagues to at least *consider* my suggestion."

Of the Councilmembers, all but one more than old enough to warrant the title of "Elder", only two would meet Delain's gaze: Deny Corbyan and his uncle, Grais Evenstar. The others--most of them dwarfs, with a couple of aged humans tossed in for good measure--were looking at anything *but* his face, exchanging uncomfortable glances with each other, or staring at the walls or tabletop as though the answer to their dilemma could be found there.

After a moment that stretched painfully, Corbyan nodded. "Thank you for your report to the Council, goodman Evenstar," he said evenly. "We will take your words under advisement ... "

Delain almost jumped to his feet in distress that they were dismissing him so easily, but he managed to restrain himself. He could see the tenor of the Council in the members' faces, feel the emotions around the large table. An outward display of distress would serve all of them ill. The old men would discount him as an irrational youth and give his words even less credence than they already paid them. From the corner of his eye, he saw Gaylear Cleareye standing to his right and a step behind, her back against the wall of the Council chamber. He was even more surprised that the Council had allowed the troll to stay than that they'd allowed *him* to address them. But he was glad for her presence, glad for the moral support she provided. He turned to his uncle, looked at him beseechingly.

Grais Evenstar nodded almost imperceptibly. "Master Corbyan," he said quietly, his trained voice carrying as clearly through the room as if he'd shouted. "I submit that postponing this matter is not wise. We need to settle it *now*. With your permission, I call for an open discussion."

The aged dwarf's eyebrows rose, almost disappearing behind his thick white bangs.

"Call it a point of personal privilege," Grais said gently.

For a moment, Delain thought Corbyan would deny Grais's request. But then the old dwarf sighed. "Point of personal privilege noted," he grunted. "Open discussion. Master Evenstar has the floor ... and the Council's attention," he added a little pointedly.

"Thank you, Master Corbyan." Grais rose fluidly to his feet, smoothing away the wrinkles in his jerkin. "I won't take much of the Council's time, but I think it's vitally important to address the matter brought before us by goodman Evenstar." He nodded respectfully to his nephew, playing the role of the courteous Councilmember to the hilt.

"Goodman Evenstar brings us disturbing news. The presence of the"--he hesitated, searching for the right word--"the *interloper* on the Unnamed Levels is a disturbing development."

One of the other Councilmembers, a human named Thom Wyrrel, grunted. "What were *these two* doing on the Unnamed Levels against the wishes of the Council?" he grumbled. "That's what *I* want to know."

Delain drew breath to speak, but Grais spoke first. "That's an issue for a later time, if we wish to address it. The fact is they *were* on the Unnamed Levels, and they *were* attacked by some unknown creature. That's one of the facts that I wish the Council to consider. Nothing even similar to this has been reported before. Something has obviously changed. And I'd like to remind my worthy colleagues"--he smiled disarmingly around the tables--"that the level where it was encountered was only two flights below the Level of Raggok ... an inhabited level, it's important to note. Master Wyrrel, do you agree?"

The old man wouldn't meet the troubadour's piercing gaze, but nodded sullenly. "Concur," he grunted.

"Thank you, Master Wyrrel." Again, Grais swept the Council with his eyes. "Something has changed, Masters," he stressed again. "If that were all, even without the rest of goodman Evenstar's report, it would be enough to concern me. To *seriously* concern me," he stressed. "Yet that *isn't* all.

"I wish the Council to consider--here, now--its response to the remainder of their report."

Corbyan shifted in his chair uncomfortably. His eyes, steely gray, and unclouded despite his advanced age, seemed to bore into Delain, to lacerate his soul. "Tell me again," the old dwarf ordered. "Describe the condition of *Azhûn*."

Delain stifled a sigh. *How many times do I have to repeat this?* He managed to keep his emotions from his face and voice, or so he thought, and said, "As you wish, Master Corbyan.

"There were cracks in the marble of *Azhûn*, as I already told the Council," he said carefully, his voice flat. "Most of the cracks were in the Arch of Water, but we also saw some in the Arch of Earth."

"Many cracks?" another dwarven Councilmember--Vilus Sand--cut in. "*How* many?"

Delain settled his hazel gaze on the wizened dwarf. "More than a dozen in the Arch of Water alone," he said quietly. "I might have missed some--the light wasn't the best, after all, and I certainly didn't want to come too close to *Azhûn* while I was trying to examine it. Most were no thicker than a dwarf's hair, but I saw two that were at least thrice as thick as that."

The Councilmembers stirred uncomfortably at his words. "More than a dozen," Master Sand whispered. Then, "You're sure?" he demanded harshly. "Absolutely sure?"

"As sure as I see you before me, Master," Delain said. "On the Gift of Astendar, I swear--such is the truth of the thing."

Several of the Councilmembers exchanged glances. They understood the severity, the binding nature, of the oath he'd just given, Delain knew. No troubadour would *ever* forswear such an oath, or use it to shield an untruth.

"And how many in the Arch of Earth?" Sand wanted to know.

"Fewer," Delain said, "perhaps no more than half a dozen. And none of them thicker than a hair."

"Near the apex of the arches, or the base?"

Delain wanted to scream. What did it *matter* where the cracks were, by all the Horrors? There were cracks in *Azhûn*--cracks in the keystone of the wards protecting the kaer! But somehow he managed to keep his voice level as he answered Master Wyrrel's question. "Near the base, Masters. Near the bases of both arches."

"And you saw nothing else amiss?" Corbyan wanted to know.

***Isn't that* enough? "Nothing, Master."**

Vilus Sand murmured something under his breath, a Throalic word that seemed to pierce Delain to the heart. *"Melakahim."* Spreading ...

By the Passions, they* know! *They've known this all along!

Delain turned desperately to Grais, watched the horrible realization spread across his uncle's face. *They've known, but they haven't told Grais, the newest member of the Council.*

Deny Corbyan nodded tiredly, his face suddenly seeming to show every one of his hundred and fifty years. "Thank you, goodman Evenstar," the Chair of the Council of Elders said again.

And Delain was on his feet, this time unable to restrain himself. "But what are you going to *do?*" he cried in anguish.

"What would you have us do?" The rhetorical question came from the human Martain Porter. Already in his seventh decade, he was still, after Grais, the youngest member of the Council. "None in the kaer have the skill to shore up the keystone."

"Do we know that for sure?" Grais asked quietly.

Nobody answered him. Delain pressed on into the silence. "We can't let word about this get out," he said earnestly. "We *can't.* Do you know the tenor of the population? Have you been out among them, have you talked to them?" And that was a key question, he realized suddenly. Did the Elders ever get out among the people they were supposed to guide, to protect? "Morale is low," he said, thinking what an understatement that was, "and word of this will just drive it lower." He almost laughed bitterly. *Scourge* it! "People are losing hope. This will destroy what little they've got left."

Delain glanced over at Grais, saw his uncle's quizzically raised eyebrow. He looked away. How strange that now he was arguing for something he'd argued *against* not so long ago. Arguing for secrecy, for concealing something vital to the future of the kaer.

But this was different--wasn't it? another part of his brain asked--this was different from concealing the news about the gauge. This kind of news was just too devastating.

With an effort, he schooled himself to calmness. "Masters," he began again, "the Council has already decided to ... to *retain to itself* ... important developments within the kaer, to"--he searched for a diplomatic way of getting his thought across--"to spare the populace something that would destroy their hope for the future."

"The gauge, you mean?" Corbyan shot a sharp look at Grais. The older troubadour's expression didn't change.

"Rumors of that are circulating throughout the kaer," Delain elaborated quickly, trying to cover up his potential blunder. *Grais wasn't supposed to have told him about that.* "Everyone knows ... or they soon *will* know, when the tales spread far enough.

"But this is different," he emphasized once more, "*very* different. The people of Kaer Moar were strong enough to deal with that truth."

"And not this one?" Wyrrel asked ironically.

Delain hesitated, remembering the foul creature. "I think not," he said finally. "In all honesty, I think not." He shrugged. "I hope I'm wrong, but can we afford to put the matter to a test?"

Corbyan snorted. "Several members of the Council argued against that course," he said slowly, "Master Evenstar and I among them." Delain blinked. He hadn't known that the Chair of the Council agreed with his uncle on this point. "Are you now arguing *for* it?"

Delain gestured with his empty palms. "I don't know *what* I'm arguing," he admitted quietly. "I just know what I've heard, what I've felt, from the people of the kaer." He took a calming breath, and struggled to keep his voice even, persuasive. For an instant, he considered using some of his troubadour talents to help sway the Elders who surrounded him, then quickly dismissed the idea as fruitless, even counterproductive. These were old men, experienced in the ways of the world, probably equally experienced with the abilities of troubadours. They'd sense what he was doing, and they'd discount whatever logic was in his words.

"Excuse me, Masters," he said, as levelly as he could, putting his palms flat on the table and leaning forward toward Corbyan. His voice is the one that matters at the moment, he judged. "I'll speak openly, with no dissembling.

"You've known about the damage to *Azhûn* for some time, haven't you?" The looks exchanged around the table were better confirmation than spoken words could ever be. "If this were the early days, when the damage to the keystone were newly discovered, then I'd probably argue differently.

"But it's *not*. The Council has known for--how long? years, possibly. As long as five years, perhaps." Again, the expressions on the Elders' faces confirmed his guess. He thought back, trying to remember events in the kaer from years before. "Six years, maybe," he corrected himself. "That was when the big earth tremor rocked the kaer, wasn't it? After the tremor, you probably sent someone down to the Closed Levels, down to *Kha'averen*, to check on *Azhûn*, didn't you? And that was when you found the keystone to be cracked."

He shrugged. "So you assumed the damage had been caused by the tremor, didn't you? And that was why you decided not to announce it to the populace." He smiled, although there was no trace of humor in his soul. "A logical enough assumption," he said, trying to inject a tone of understanding, of conciliation, into his voice. "Anyone with any wisdom would have made the same decision, I suspect. You assumed the damage was a one-time event, caused by an external catastrophe. You assumed the damage wouldn't progress.

"Yet it *has* progressed, hasn't it?" He let an edge of urgency sharpen his voice now. "And perhaps that means the initial damage *wasn't* caused entirely by the earth tremor. That's a very real possibility now. Perhaps the keystone is breaking down for other reasons."

"Horrors," breathed one of the Elders--another dwarf, Mystin Dalewood, who hadn't spoken yet. "They've found a weakness in *Azhûn*, and they're exploiting it--breaking down the keystone of our wards."

Delain shook his head firmly. "We don't know that," he said urgently. "We *can't* know that ... and we can't allow ourselves to think it's true. For all we know it could be simply the action of time. How many centuries has the keystone lasted, without--*without*, I remind you--the presence of any wizards skilled in the art of maintaining the wards? Perhaps this is a natural process. Has anyone examined *Azhûn* to confirm or deny that?" He looked around the table, saw the shaking heads. Then why not, by the Passions? he wanted to ask. But he kept the question to himself.

"For all we know, then," he pressed on, "the keystone could be experiencing changes that its creators expected. It could be capable of lasting for many more centuries, we just don't know.

"Yet what would the people think if they learned of this?" he asked rhetorically. He turned to the Elder who'd just spoken. "You, Master Dalewood. Do you have any reason to think that the people of Kaer Moar wouldn't come to the same conclusion you did? Of course not. The people of Kaer Moar--your charges, *our* charges--would fear the worst ... and quite naturally.

"But, even more disturbingly, they'd realize that the Council was keeping secrets from them." *They already know that*, he chose not to add. "*Important* secrets, secrets that affect their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren. When that fact became common knowledge, how could the Council maintain the confidence of the kaer? Would the populace ever trust the Council again? And if not, what damage would that do to the kaer?"

"How would the Brothers of Night respond to this news?" Grais asked. From the involuntary flinches on the faces of several Councilmembers, Delain knew his uncle's question had struck home.

"Twilighters," one of the more decrepit Elders muttered under his breath. Like *you* ? Delain didn't ask.

"Perhaps," Grais responded equably. "But how *would* they interpret this? Think on it, Masters, I ask you."

Corbyan frowned. "The decision has already been made."

"Then *keep* to it," Delain urged, apparently an instant ahead of his uncle.

"I never fully agreed with the Council's decision," Dalewood mumbled. "If our people are to die, then ... "

A new voice cut the old man off. "Does it matter?" Delain turned in surprise, to stare at Gaylear Cleareye clan Granitebone. Her cheeks were flushed with self-consciousness, and her eyes downcast, yet still she spoke with surprising determination. "The keystone is damaged. Strange, vicious creatures haunt the deeper levels. The wards *may* be decaying, they *may* be falling. The question is, can we do anything about it?"

"What *could* we do?" Dalewood asked. He sighed dispiritedly. "The Passions truly have deserted us ... "

***"No!"* Grais's fist thumped down on the table. "No," he repeated. "We can't despair. Above all, *we* can't give up hope.**

"I agree with goodman Evenstar," the older troubadour said, his voice calm once more. He glanced toward Gaylear. "And goodwoman Cleareye," he added. "There are several things we must do. First, determine for ourselves when the damage to *Azhûn* first occurred--*truthfully*, without concealment, at least, not within this room." His gaze around the table wasn't accusing, but still several of the Elders flinched visibly from it. "Second, determine if any way exists--*any* way--to shore up the keystone and the wards. And third ... "

Grais paused. "And third," he emphasized, "keep what we've learned today within this room." He shrugged, deceptively lightly. "I know I was one of those who argued *against* concealing knowledge from our kaer's inhabitants, but Masters, *things have changed*."

"And so does your opinion, Master Evenstar," a soft voice said, "like a weathervane in a high wind." Delain--and most of the Councilmembers--spun, to stare at the door to the Chamber. The door was open, and a slight, white-robed figure stood in the doorway. An elf, he was, slender and stooped with age. His thin face was the white of polished ivory, unlined, with high cheekbones and severe features. It was his eyes that captured Delain's attention, though, sharp as those of a bird of prey, and of a brilliant blue, almost like bright stones.

"Master Corbyan!" Grais protested. "I understood this meeting would be kept confidential!"

It was Mystin Dalewood who responded. "Are we to keep something of this import from one of the *true* guardians of Kaer Moar?" he asked sullenly.

Delain saw his uncle fix the old dwarf with a sharp glare, but the voice of the new arrival cut him off before he could remonstrate.

"Master Evenstar raises an interesting point," Kolban Darkways said, stroking his distinctive elven ears in a kind of nervous tick that Delain had seen the old man display before. "How *would* the Brothers of Night respond to this news?"

How long have you been listening, Kolban? Delain asked silently.

"We know how they'd ... "

And again, Kolban Darkways cut Grais off, his voice still quiet, but as sharp as a honed knife. "Yes, Master Evenstar, we *do* know. And who are we to say they would be wrong? Perhaps the Horrors *have* somehow damaged *Azhûn* to weaken the wards protecting us."

"Fearmongering," Corbyan muttered.

Kolban Darkways shot a sharp look at the Chair of the Council. "If telling the truth is fearmongering," he said, "then, yes, perhaps I *am* a fearmonger."

Delain couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "We don't know it's the truth," he snapped.

The elf turned his stony eyes on Delain, who had to fight back the urge to drop his gaze, to look away. "Goodman Evenstar," Kolban said slowly, seeming to savor the name. "I pose you the converse question, then. Do we know--*know*, mind you--that it's a falsehood?"

"No," Delain began, "but ... "

"Are you sure enough that it's a falsehood to bet your life on it?" Kolban's voice was softer still, but cut as deeply as a stiletto. "To bet the lives of everyone in Kaer Moar? Or maybe I should say 'the *souls*', hmm?"

"It's not goodman Evenstar's place to be questioned before the Elders of the kaer," Grais cut in firmly. "Particularly by someone who has no seat on the Council."

"*These* two spoke before the Council," Mystin Dalewood snapped, pointing directly at Delain and Gaylear, a definite breach of good manners. "On what grounds do you forbid Master Darkways the same privilege granted to *these?"*

Grais Evenstar smiled politely, although Delain could tell from the look in his eyes that his uncle was struggling to suppress his anger. "Our two guests spoke after approval was granted by vote of the Council, if you recall, Master Dalewood," the older troubadour pointed out. "No such vote was conducted in the case of *goodman* Darkways"--he stressed the title--"was it? Those are my grounds." He turned to the Chair of the Council. "Master Corbyan, may I have a ruling?"

Corbyan looked around uncomfortably. "Master Evenstar makes a good point," he said slowly. Delain watched his sharp gaze rest on the face of each other Councilmember in turn, as the dwarf silently gauged the mood of the Council. "Yet I see no harm in granting goodman Darkways the floor for a brief remark."

Grais slumped back heavily in his chair, and Delain imagined he could almost hear his uncle's teeth grinding together.

Kolban Darkways smiled. "Thank you, Master Corbyan," he said politely. "I won't take up much of the Council's time." He stepped closer to the table, and regarded each of the Councilmembers in turn, his blue eyes glittering over steepled fingers.

"From various sources, I learned that goodman Evenstar and goodwoman Cleareye would be addressing the Council," he began, his voice falling into a singsong lilt that was surprisingly easy to listen to. "I also was able to deduce the topic of their report." He shrugged, with a self-deprecating smile. "Perhaps I should not have learned what I did. But the fact is I did, and any remonstrations concerning the fact may as well be saved for another time, hmm?

"My sole purpose today," the old elf continued, "is to contribute to the discussion that must arise from the report. As Master Evenstar so ably pointed out, I have no seat on the Council, and so I have no say in the final decision reached by this body. Yet I feel I would not be doing my duty to the kaer, and to those who dwell in it, if I did not bring before the Council some concerns that might not otherwise be heard."

Grais cut in sharply, "I think the Council is aware of any concerns ... " He stopped in mid-sentence as Corbyan raised a hand.

"Goodman Darkways has the attention of the Elders," the Chair of the Council snapped. Grais nodded his acceptance, but Delain was sure he wasn't the only one who could see that his uncle didn't like it.

"Thank you, Master Corbyan," Kolban repeated. "To continue ...

"The Elders of the kaer have many duties that consume much of their time. These duties diminish their opportunities for conversation with the people of the kaer." Delain scowled. Kolban's words were echoing his own thoughts of only a few minutes before, but he had a strong feeling he wouldn't like where those thoughts would lead.

"Perhaps some members of the Council"--and here he nodded politely toward Grais Evenstar--"spend more of their time beyond the walls of this chamber. Yet, for various reasons, those Councilmembers may be *among* the people, but not *of* them, if you take my meaning." He smiled again. "Perhaps it is the nature of both Councilmembers and troubadours to talk more than they listen, hmm?"

Across the table, Delain saw his uncle cloud up. But Corbyan was frowning pointedly at Grais, and the

troubadour managed to hold his peace.

"I, on the other hand"--Kolban raised his empty palms--"I am just an old man. I speak little--what would I have to say, anyway, that people would wish to hear?--but I listen to what happens around me. To the conversation of people in the corridors, to the concerns brought to me by those who visit me in the hope my age has brought me wisdom." He chuckled, as if at the patent idiocy of that.

"I hear much, Masters," the elf continued, "much, perhaps, that never reaches your ears. Many are talking about *Fala'an*--the 'gauge', as some call it. They know it has stopped falling--know it stopped long ago."

"And *how* do they know that, goodman Darkways?" Delain asked coldly.

He suppressed a shiver as Kolban's cold eyes settled on him. "You think I spread the word, hmm?" The elf chuckled thinly. "But what sense does that make, I ask you? The matter would have been discussed in the confidentiality of the Council chamber. Was I present to hear those discussions? Of course not. How then could I be responsible?

"Not that it matters," Kolban went on, turning away as though Delain held no more importance for him. "The kaer knows *Fala'an* has stopped falling. More important, perhaps, the Brothers of Night know it."

The elf's voice took on a new, more distant tone, almost as if he were speaking for his own ears alone. "There are tales told in the corridors of Kaer Moar," he said, "legends remembered in the chambers." He smiled frostily at Grais Evenstar. "Tales that our worthy troubadours seem unwilling to recall ... or, at least, to teach to their apprentices." His gaze shifted to Delain.

"No," Kolban corrected sharply, "I misspoke myself. *Some* of our troubadours have forgotten them. Others have not."

"The ones under your sway, you mean?"

"I?" Kolban turned to Grais with an expression of surprise too great to even allow for affront. "Under my sway? Master Evenstar, I have no"--he seemed to savor the word on his tongue--"*sway*. True, I speak with some troubadours, since I have a taste for the old words, and enjoy discussing them with others of like mind. But beyond that, I have no *sway*.

"I have heard some of those tales myself, Masters," the elf continued smoothly. "Interesting tales, they are. Seemingly meaningless, or almost so--disjointed images and ideas. And yet ...

"And yet, if you approach them from the right frame of mind, meaning starts to emerge after all. In a word, many of them seem to take on the guise of prophecy."

He shrugged again. "Now, I don't claim to believe that these tales *are* prophecy. How would one such as I know, one way or the other? Yet I feel the Council must know there *are* those who so believe. The Brothers of Night, of course--but others as well. These people--perhaps benighted, perhaps enlightened--fear that the developments with *Fala'an* match elements from the darkest of these 'lost tales', if I can so style them.

"The tales, you see, list a series of events that will foretell the doom of Kaer Moar--or, at least, they can be so read ... and people do so read them. The earth tremor of half a decade ago; the increasing number of stillbirths and deaths among the infants of the kaer; the matter of *Fala'an*; other events, too, all seem to fit into this interpretation. Those who give these tales credence are waiting for another ... well, 'sign,' if you will. Another indication that the tales of prophecy are true. Another indication that doom will soon fall."

"What doom?" Martain Porter asked softly. Delain could almost smell the fear emanating from him.

"What do the prophecies tell us?"

"Just what the Brothers of Night fear," Kolban answered simply. "That the Scourge will never end. *If* that is the way you choose to read the lost tales, of course."

The aging Councilmembers shifted in their seats, shooting fearful glances back and forth, seemingly unwilling to meet the calm, unruffled gaze of Kolban Darkways.

All except Grais Evenstar. The older troubadour rose to his feet again, and cast a speculative look at Kolban. "And you, goodman Darkways," he asked softly. "How do you choose to read these lost tales of yours?" Scorn etched his words like acid. "Do you give any credence to these ... these *prophecies?"*

Kolban smiled. "It matters little what I believe, Master Evenstar. What matters is what *they* believe." He gestured broadly, encompassing the entire kaer beyond the Council chamber's walls.

"Your beliefs might matter if you share them with others," Grais pointed out. "What was it you said? People who visit you in the hope your age has brought you wisdom, perhaps. What do you tell them when they ask about these 'lost tales' of yours?"

"Why would they ask me about them in the first place?" Kolban countered. "Am I a troubadour? No, I'm an old man who dabbles in nethermancy--of some little power ... and perhaps some little wisdom that the years have granted to me." He chuckled softly. "You seem eager to cast me as a major player in some drama of your invention, Master Evenstar. In truth, I'm a minor character, hardly worthy of a single line in the saga playing out in your mind.

"Masters." Once more he turned to the Council as a whole. "I come to you to ask you to consider the fears of the kaer, that is my sole purpose here. Perhaps I bear bad news, but should the messenger be punished for the nature of his message, hmm? All I ask is that you consider what I've laid before you, when the Council comes to make its decision. That is my sole concern."

"'Sole concern,' my anus!" Grais spat. He slumped down on the stone bench outside the Council chamber. His voice was low, so as not to carry to the small knot of Elders further down the corridor, but Delain could hear his anger as clearly as if he'd screamed.

After Kolban Darkway's address to the Elders, Master Corbyan had recessed the Council for a few minutes. To give the Councilmembers time to digest what they'd heard, that was his excuse. Delain thought it more likely to make it easier to shuffle Gaylear and him ... and Kolban too--out of the meeting without being too blunt about it.

His sudden anger spent, Grais rubbed at his face. He looks drained, Delain thought, even more drained than a day ago. The older troubadour looked up and smiled wanly at Delain and Gaylear. "Well," he said, "at least the other Elders heard what you had to say, in your own words. I wasn't sure they'd even permit you into the Council chamber, let alone listen to you."

"*Did* they listen?" Delain asked. "They heard, but did they *listen?"*

Grais shook his head slowly. "I won't know that until the Council reconvenes." He sighed. "I think they listened more to Kolban," he admitted unwillingly.

"*Kolban*." Delain snorted. "What in the name of the Passions is he up to, anyway?"

"Is he associated with the Brothers of Night?" Gaylear asked quietly, the first words she'd spoken since they'd left the Council chamber.

"Associated with the Brothers, or behind them," Grais answered grimly. Then he shook his head. "That's my personal opinion, for what it's worth." He flashed an ironic smile. "Not much, apparently, as far as the other Elders are concerned.

"I'd bet ... well, not my life, but my second-best harp ... that he *is* closely involved with the Brothers," Grais went on. "No proof, of course. Kolban's too smart for that ... and the Brothers too paranoid.

"And while I'm in a betting mood," Grais continued, "I'd bet my *best* harp that our friend goodman Darkways is behind the rumors about the gauge. After today, it's a good guess that Mystin Dalewood told him despite the Council's decision to keep it confidential." He frowned, interrupting himself. "Come to think on it, it was probably Master Dalewood who told our stormcrow friend about today's agenda. In any case," he said with a sigh, "once he'd learned of the gauge from Master Dalewood, then the good nethermancer took it upon himself to spread the word, for his own reasons."

"*What* reasons?" Delain wanted to know. "If there's one thing I don't understand it's that. How does it benefit Kolban to spread this kind of news?"

His uncle's lips quirked in a crooked smile. "You've never given much thought to politics, have you?" he asked.

Delain blinked, realizing what Grais was implying. "Kolban wants a seat on the Council?"

"Anyone with a taste for influence or notoriety--or with a simple taste for meddling in other people's business, for that matter--wants a seat on the Council," the troubadour confirmed. "And to my mind, Kolban Darkways fits all three of those categories.

"When Master Ramoth died last year, everyone knew the Elders had to fill the seat on the Council. Kolban wanted that seat, and he had significant backing within the Council." He shrugged. "To this day, I'm not exactly sure why *I* was named.

"In any case, that's when Kolban started to apply pressure. He's playing a deep game, and I don't understand all the moves--or *know* about them, come to think of it--but it's pretty obvious what his goal is. He wants to undercut my influence on the Council, and the influence of those who supported me."

"But what he's doing, it's undercutting the influence of the entire Council," protested Delain.

Grais nodded. "True enough. He's got to realize it, though, so it must be a part of his overall plan." He shrugged. "Maybe he wants to destroy my ... my *faction* , if you want to call it that, but also to whittle down the influence of the others so that when he finally gets the seat he's after, he'll be the most influential member of the Council."

"He's after Master Corbyan's chair?" Gaylear asked.

"Why not shoot for the moon?" Grais chuckled grimly. "Even if you miss, you're still among the stars." He sighed again. "It's an old political trick, dating back as long as Name-givers have *had* politics--a classic way of overthrowing a government. Use your influence to control a group that's dissatisfied with the way things are being handled. Use that group to apply pressure, both on the government and on the populace itself. When everyone's terrified that things are coming apart, that's when you call off your dogs. Problem solved, and you're the hero. The people toss out the government that couldn't solve the problem and replace it with the one person who could: *you*.

"There's a problem, though." His voice lost its ironic tone, and his smile faded. "All too often, it's easier to mobilize a group of people than it is to stop them once you've got what you want. I'm afraid that our good

nethermancer might well find that out. To his loss, and to ours."

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Six

"He said that about Kolban several times, your uncle," Gaylear mused as they walked away from the Councilchamber. "'The good nethermancer,' he called him. Is Kolban a nethermancer?"

"Hmm?" Delain glanced over. He hadn't really been listening, so deeply was he absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Kolban a nethermancer," the troll repeated. "If so, then maybe he knows something about the keystone--some way of repairing it, maybe."

Delain laughed. "No, that's not in the cards. He might be a nethermancer, but he's not *much* of one--First Circle, maybe Second at the most. And he's *certainly* not a wizard." He quickly sobered. "You were thinking if he *could* repair *Azhûn* , that might be how he plans to rein in the Brothers of Night when he's done with them, weren't you?" He looked at Gaylear with more respect. "Clever," he breathed. Then he smiled again. "Have you ever considered a career in politics?"

The troll snorted. "I'd rather be Horror-marked," she said flatly.

"There are some things you shouldn't say in public." Both human and troll jumped at the voice right beside them. "Isn't that what you told me, Delain?"

Delain turned quickly, and it was almost like Karena Hearthrock materialized, ghostlike, from the shadows of a recessed doorway. Her hair was loose for a change, not pulled back severely from her forehead. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, but whether from exertion or anger Delain couldn't tell. Most likely the latter, he decided. "Good forenoon to you, Karena," was all he said.

Beside him, Gaylear was looking back and forth from one to the other, almost as if she didn't know what to expect. Delain frowned slightly. Was there something going on here he should be catching?

"How went your meeting with the Council?" the dwarf asked, her voice casual, and Delain suddenly had more to concern him than some possible secret between Gaylear and Karena.

He looked around quickly, saw that the corridor was empty for a dozen yards in each direction. Taking Karena's arm, he drew her over to the side, back into the shelter of the doorway where she'd been waiting. "What have you heard?" he asked urgently.

He saw her eyes change, saw her consider a sarcastic answer, then decide against it. "That you'd been called before the Council to tell the Elders something important," she replied after a moment. "That's why I waited for you here."

"What?" he demanded. "To tell them *what* ?"

Karena's brows drew together in the start of a scowl. "You're asking me?"

"What have you *heard* we were to tell them?" he snapped back.

"All I heard was that it was important."

Delain sighed. The Kolban rumor mill strikes again, he thought grimly. "Where did you hear this, Karena? Who from?" Again he saw the start of a scowl, and went on earnestly, "It's important. I give you my word. Who did you hear it from?"

"Scourge, *I* don't know. Who do you *ever* hear gossip from?" She was silent for a moment, then, "Some people were talking about it on the Great Gyre, a couple of old tuskers." If she saw Gaylear bridle at the insulting term for orks and trolls, she didn't react. "I overheard them yapping about it. I don't know where *they* heard it. But it's true, isn't it?"

Delain nodded, suddenly feeling as tired as his uncle had looked. "It's true," he admitted. "So you heard, and decided to come looking for us? To find out what we were talking to the Council about?"

Karena hissed scornfully. "I don't care *spit* why they wanted you. And anyway," she went on, indirectly contradicting herself, "you'll tell me when and if you want me to know.

"I came looking for you because I wanted to tell *you* something, Troubadour."

Delain blinked with surprise at the heat in the dwarf's voice. "I'm sorry if I offended you, Karena," he said honestly. "I didn't mean to do that."

The dwarf grunted. "Offense doesn't have to be meant to be taken," she grumbled. "Anyway," she continued, "I heard something new in the corridors. After the other day ... well, I thought you'd want to know about it."

A chill seemed to touch Delain's heart. "What did you hear?"

"One of those stormcrows who call themselves 'Brothers of Night' was holding forth in the High Concourse. Little new to it at first, just the same *fralkh* they always shovel out. You know, the Scourge won't end this time, the Dawngate will never open, and on and on.

"But then he started to change his tune," Karena went on grimly. "He started talking about when the Horrors would break through our wards and enter the kaer--*when* , mind you, not *if* . He started repeating the old tales about the city of Draoglin, about the Horror that ate the souls of the children." She snorted. "Almost like a troubadour, he was," she said, fixing Delain with a strange glare, "except that he was frothing at the mouth like a rabid dog.

"Kaer Moar would become another Draoglin, he said, except it wouldn't be just the children whose souls would be devoured. Once the wards collapsed, there'd be nothing anyone could do to save their souls from the Horrors.

"So best not to remain alive when that day came," she concluded chillingly, "that's what he said."

"What?" Delain shook his head slowly, unwilling to believe he'd understood her properly. "What?"

"You heard me, Troubadour," Karena snapped. "Better dead than Horror-ridden, that's what he was

implying. No," she corrected, "that's what he was *saying* , outright." She laughed without mirth. "'Kill yourselves now, because if you leave it up to the Horrors, it'll *hurt* .' Idiot!"

"How did people react?" Delain asked.

Karena looked at him, her expression bleak. "*That's* the frightening thing, Delain. They were *listening* to him--listening to him rant. Nobody was laughing at him, nobody was telling him to shut his snout. *Scourge* ," she swore, "some were even nodding their heads, like what he was saying made sense." She spat on the floor to her left, a gesture of contempt. "*Fralkh* , who's the bigger fool? The fool, or the fool who *listens* to him?"

"They were listening?" Delain echoed. "Many?"

"Enough," Karena shot back. "Two dozen, maybe more--I didn't bother to do a head count," she added with a sneer. "And not just the twilighters you might expect, either. Normal folk, Troubadour, people who should know better. They were nodding their heads as if what the stormcrow was saying was the most logical thing they'd ever heard."

"Did he say anything about *Azhûn* ?"

The dwarf's head snapped round to stare at Gaylear. "No," she answered. "No, nothing about *Azhûn*. Why? *Should* he have said something?"

Both women turned toward Delain, their eyes asking different, but equally urgent, questions. For a long moment he vacillated, then came to a decision. "There's something you should know, Karena," he said quietly. He sighed. "I'm going against my own recommendation to the Elders, but ... " He shrugged helplessly. "Who knows, maybe you've got some thoughts that could make a difference." He looked around pointedly. "We need somewhere private to talk."

When he'd finished summarizing the events of the Council, Delain sat back and waited for Karena's reaction. He didn't have to wait long, but the reaction wasn't quite what he'd expected.

The dwarf shot up out of her low chair like she'd been levitated. Her usually mobile face was expressionless, as if it had been carved from unyielding stone. She paced in silence, back and forth across the common room of her living quarters. Delain could see tension, internal conflict, in every line of her stocky body. Finally she spun on her heel, and fixed him with a vicious glare.

"Well, *thank* you, goodman Evenstar," she hissed. "Thank you so much for sharing this with me. *Just* what I wanted to know. As if I didn't have *enough* to think about." She slumped back down in her chair, and rubbed a hand across her mouth as if wiping something distasteful away. "That was uncalled for," she muttered after a moment. She shrugged, with a half-smile that was about the closest Delain had ever seen her come to an apology. "All bile aside, though, why *did* you tell me this? Just so I could keep you two company in your unpleasant knowledge?"

Delain shook his head. "Think back, Karena," he urged. "Now that you know what you know ... the Brother of Night ... did *he* know? Did anything he said sound like he knew about *Azhûn* ?"

Karena's eyes widened slightly in understanding. Then, "No," she said after a moment's thought, her voice firm. "Nothing specific. Just vague fearmongering."

Delain let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "*That's* reassuring, at least."

"Is it?" Karena asked. "Maybe Kolban hasn't gotten around to telling his flunkies about the keystone yet.

Next time, maybe the Brothers will have *all* the details." She glared off into the indeterminate distance for a few moments, then, "What's the Council going to do?" she asked suddenly.

Delain shrugged again. "Discuss it, at first," he began, "and then--"

"*Nothing* ," Karena cut him off. "And then *nothing*. They'll talk, and they'll decide there's nothing they can do without looking like idiots for ignoring the problems for so long. So they'll just pretend nothing's wrong, and let it slide." She looked angry enough to spit venom. "*Kulaku* ," she swore viciously, "that's what they all are, *kulaku* , every one of them."

"Not *every* one." Gaylear's voice was quiet, but still cut through the dwarf's rant like a sword through silk.

For an instant, Delain thought Karena was going to argue the point. But then she nodded briefly. "Not *every* one, you're right," she agreed. "If there were more like Grais Evenstar ... but there aren't." She turned back to Delain. "So what do *you* plan to do about this, Troubadour? Sit back and watch? Compose some poems about it that only the Horrors will get to read? *What?* "

With an effort, Delain suppressed his own flash of anger. Karena was just letting off tension, he knew, but that didn't make it any the less irritating. When he spoke, his voice was carefully neutral. "First order of business, as I see it, is to find out how bad the situation really is."

"That's what the Council should be doing," Karena snapped.

"Granted. But will they?" Delain said, knowing the answer. "Somebody must." He looked at the two women. "Do either of you know any wizards?"

"Are you *sure* the Council won't object?" It was the third time in as many minutes that Peg Ifollis had asked the question.

Beside him, Delain could see Karena Hearthrock clouding up, ready to snap at the wizard. Before she could explode, he said reassuringly, "Don't worry, goodwoman Ifollis, the Council *won't* object." Because they won't find out until it's too late to object, he added silently.

The wizard didn't seem completely convinced, but at least she picked up her pace again, keeping up with the others as they descended into the depths of the kaer. Shadows shifted and flickered around them, cast by the oil lamps that Karena and Gaylear carried, suspended from carry-sticks resting on their shoulders. Their footfalls echoed distantly through the corridors and chambers of *Kha'averen* .

"Where are we going?" Ifollis asked.

Delain smiled wryly. "You'll see." He stopped for a moment, confirming his bearings. *Yes, a right turn here* ...

And there, ahead of them, was the archway, with its complex carvings. The Throalic letters of the inscription seemed to move like live things in the lamplight. *As I stand, then let the World stand* . Behind him, Delain heard a sharp gasp. He turned.

The tall wizard had stopped in her tracks, gaping at the arch. "*Azhûn* ." Her voice was little more than a sigh. Delain could see her knuckles standing out, bone white, as she gripped her small leather satchel of magical tools.

He looked a silent question at Karena. It was the dwarf who'd recommended Ifollis in the first place,

claiming that the human woman had the integrity to keep her word once she'd been sworn to silence. This was the pivotal moment, Delain knew. Ifollis could turn back now, refuse to continue, and leave them no further ahead than they'd been a couple of hours before. And where would we go from there? he wondered. Wizards were rare within Kaer Moar, and rarer still were wizards they could trust to keep matters secret.

It was Gaylear who broke the tense silence. "Yes," she rumbled. "*Azhûn* ."

"Goodwoman Ifollis, we need your talents," the troll went on earnestly. "Not just the three of us--*all* of us." The sweep of her arm took in the entire kaer.

The human looked up blankly at the troll towering over her. "But what ... ?"

"You'll understand soon enough," Delain promised. "Then you'll know why we're being so"--he paused judiciously--"so *careful* . Please, goodwoman Ifollis. It *is* important."

The silence stretched painfully, but then she nodded once. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

For the sixth time, Delain checked the level of oil in the lamp Gaylear had brought. As soon as he'd realized that wizard Ifollis didn't need much light for her investigations, he'd quenched Karena's lamp to save fuel. Now he was glad he'd done so. Peg Ifollis had been scrutinizing the marble arches of *Azhûn* for more than three straight hours. Soon the lamp would be out of oil, and he'd have to re-light the other one. At least we'll have light to find our way back to the occupied levels, he told himself, suppressing a shiver at the thought of wandering lost through the Closed Levels in the dark.

He sighed, shifting his position on the hard floor. Karena was pacing like a caged animal around the periphery of the round chamber, as she'd been doing for the past couple of hours. Sometimes he could hear her muttering to herself, although he couldn't make out the words. Probably swearing a blue streak, he thought with a grin. In contrast, Gaylear was sitting motionless in tailor fashion, her eyes closed, her expression peaceful. Both his friends were dealing with their tension in their own ways, he knew. As for him, Delain knew he didn't have the self-control to meditate like Gaylear, and he was too proud to pace like Karena. Again he shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position.

Peg Ifollis was crouched down beside *Azhûn* , silhouetted against a faint topaz blue aura that surrounded the marble arches. Tools of her trade--roughly carved bone fetishes, chunks of lodestone and fool's-gold, and other strange items--were arrayed on the basalt floor before her. Over the rhythmic tread of Karena's boots, Delain could hear Ifollis singing a repetitive, droning song in a sad, minor key. The topaz "witch light" surrounding the keystone seemed to wax and wane with the volume of her song. Opening his senses to their fullest extent, Delain tried to sense the threads that the wizard was weaving to and around the ancient artifact. In vain, as it turned out. Not that he should be surprised, he reminded himself. No matter how often the sages and philosophers claimed that all magic was the same, Delain couldn't fully accept that the threads he wove with his voice and instrument were the same a wizard used to contact other worlds. Idly, to take his mind off his worries--or to *try* to do so, at least--he concentrated on Ifollis's song, mentally composing complex variations on the doleful theme.

He'd evaluated--and discarded as just too depressing--his fifth full variation on the theme when the wizard's voice finally faded to silence. The blue witch light had faded from around *Azhûn* , and Ifollis was gathering up her tools.

Both his companions had noticed, too. Karena had stopped in her pacing, frozen on the other side of the

chamber, staring expressionlessly at the wizard. Nearer to him, Gaylear Cleareye was on her feet, her gaze shifting back and forth between Delain and Ifollis.

Slowly, Delain rose, ignoring the stiffness in his joints from sitting on the cold ground for so long. His stomach churned painfully as he waited for Ifollis to finish packing her tools away in her leather satchel. Emotions warred within him. Part of him wanted to scream, "*Well?* " at the tall wizard, to rip an answer from her *right* now. Another part wanted to put off that terrible moment as long as possible. He tried to read the woman's expression as she walked slowly toward him.

"How long have you known?"

Delain felt as though his bowels had filled with icy water. Her query was a definitive answer to his own mental question. His voice sounded dull in his own ears as he answered, "We didn't *know* . We *feared* , that was all."

Ifollis nodded slowly. "The Council, then. How long have *they* known?"

For a moment, Delain was surprised at the perceptiveness of her question. But then he reminded himself that wizards were used to understanding the intricacies of theoretical magic. *Compared to that, it couldn't be so difficult understanding a group of crotchety Elders?* "Who knows?" he said. "Years, maybe."

Ifollis nodded. At first, he thought she was unmoved by her realization, but then Delain saw the way her bloodless lips pressed together. She's scared witless, he realized. Just as we are.

"Tell us." The troubadour almost jumped at the dwarf's harsh voice close beside him. So intent had Delain been on reading Ifollis's expression that he hadn't noticed Karena crossing the chamber to join them.

The dwarf's balled fists were set firmly on her hips, her jaw thrust out pugnaciously. "Well? How bad is it, spell-mutterer?"

Delain winced inside, but Peg Ifollis seemed to have too much on her mind to react to the dwarf's insult.

"I suspect you know already," she said, her voice as chilling as the rock that surrounded them. "*Azhûn* is damaged. The threads woven around and through it centuries ago have begun to unravel. And once the process has begun, it can only accelerate." She plucked at a voluminous sleeve. "As with old cloth, once the threads begin to fray, they fray ever faster ... until the weave comes apart entirely."

"Can you ... ?" Delain stopped, searching for the right words. "Can you bind it back up again? Re-weave the frayed threads before they unravel any more?"

Ifollis chuckled mirthlessly. "As well as ask me to build a new keystone from scratch."

"Well, why not, Scourge it?" Karena demanded. "Weave a new one."

The wizard's deep-set eyes settled on the dwarven swordmaster. In the light of the one remaining lamp, they seemed to flash dangerously. But then Delain saw Peg Ifollis rein in her anger. Deceptively casual, she indicated the sword that hung at Karena's belt. "That weapon," she said lightly. "When are you going to enchant your blade with the same magics as Kegel's sword?" She named an ancient dwarven warrior, the subject of many epic tales.

Karena's brows drew together. "You taunt me, spell-mutterer," she spat. "Tales say the knowledge of those enchantments died with Kegel."

"Just as the knowledge of how to weave a keystone died with enchanters who've been dust almost as long as the kaer has stood!" Karena took an involuntary step back from the ferocity of Ifollis's tones.

With a visible effort, the wizard brought her emotions under control. "Nobody knows the techniques used to create *Azhûn* ," she explained more calmly, pointedly turning aside from the sputtering dwarf. "The skills, the knowledge--they were rare enough even before the closing of the kaer. Perhaps only a handful of masters--wizards who were also elementalists--knew the secrets that went into the construction of *Azhûn* ."

Delain frowned. "But that doesn't make sense," he pointed out slowly. "There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of kaers, weren't there? How could the skills necessary be so rare?"

"Different kaers used different methods in weaving their wards. So I was taught, at least, and my master before me, and his before him. The method used in Kaer Moar--weaving all the wards into a single matrix with *Azhûn* as a central keystone--was an experiment." Ifollis shrugged. "Theoretically, it should have led to stronger wards."

"So much for theory," Karena grumbled, just loudly enough to be sure she'd be heard.

"No!" Ifollis turned on her sharply. "No," she said again. "The wards *were* strong--*are* strong, still. They *have* held." She pointed a long forefinger at Karena. "You, blade-woman. Do you know--*know!* -- that the wards protecting Kaer Moar are any less effective than those guarding other kaers? Well?

"How *can* you?" She answered her own question, drowning out the dwarf's sullen answer. "For all you know--for all *any* of us know--this is the only kaer that hasn't been breached by the Horrors. Have you considered that?

"No," Ifollis answered herself again. "Of course you haven't. So *think* , blade-woman, before you speak. Or stay out of the discourse of those wiser than you."

From the corner of his eye, Delain watched Karena's reaction, saw rage and humiliation battle across her face. After a moment, she turned on her heel and stamped away, grumbling under her breath. She's terrified too, he realized with a chill. That was the only possible explanation for why she hadn't taken a swing at Ifollis ...

"So the knowledge was lost," Delain repeated, to get the discussion back on track.

"Yes," Ifollis confirmed. "I don't know how, or when--nobody alive does. But it *was* lost."

"What about other kinds of wards?" he suggested.

"The more traditional form of ward has to be built into the walls of the kaer during their construction." The wizard shook her head tiredly. "I've considered all the possibilities, I think, goodman Evenstar."

"How long, then?"

Ifollis sighed. "There's no way to tell for sure," she admitted slowly. "I've tried, but I just don't understand enough about the weaving involved."

"Decades?" Delain suggested softly. "Years?"

"Months," the wizard corrected. "A year at most, possibly as little as two months." She shrugged again. "As I say, once the pattern begins to unravel ... " She didn't have to finish.

Delain nodded. His skin felt cold all over, his senses preternaturally acute. He ran his tongue over his dry lips, feeling the rough texture of the skin. "And when it does?" he asked. "When it does finally unravel?"

"The wards collapse," Peg Ifollis said simply. "And nothing remains to keep the Horrors out of Kaer Moar."

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Seven

The world seemed to spin sickeningly about Delain. Blindly, he felt behind him for the cold wall of the chamber to steady himself. Peg Ifollis's words had chilled his heart. *Nothing to keep the Horrors out of Kaer Moar?*

The disorientation lasted only a moment, then the world returned to stability around him. He nodded slowly, and glanced around him.

Gaylear was close by his side, more concerned about his reaction than the wizard's news itself, if her expression was any guide. Karena was still keeping her distance, but he could see by her eyes, wide and staring in the lamplight, that she'd heard Ifollis's words as clearly as he had.

He nodded again. His thoughts were sluggish, like congealing oil. He knew he should say something--*think* of something--but nothing would come. At last he managed to force his tongue to work. "Then there's ... " He couldn't bring himself to finish the statement aloud. *Then there's nothing we can do ...*

"Nothing," Peg Ifollis said, "if the Horrors truly are still outside the kaer."

That brought Karena back into the conversation with a vengeance. "*Fralkh!* " she cursed. "Of *course* the Scourge-touched Horrors are still out there."

"Oh?" The wizard's voice wasn't loud, but still it cut the dwarf off in mid-rant. "And again you know that for sure, do you, blade-woman?"

Karena spat on the floor. "*Everyone* knows ... " Then she brought herself up short, and she blinked.

"Yes." Ifollis nodded. "*Everyone* knows the Horrors are still outside the kaer, trying to get in. Everyone knows it.

"But *how* do they know it? How do we know the Scourge still continues?"

"*Fala'an* ," Gaylear Cleareye said tentatively. "The gauge."

Ifollis just shrugged.

The mental fog that had almost paralyzed Delain's mind seemed to be thinning. "I think I understand what you're saying," he began slowly. "The Scourge isn't supposed to be over until the gauge shows that the level of magic has dropped to a minimum. But the keystone isn't supposed to decay in power either, is it?"

Karena snorted her disgust. "So what?" she demanded. "Just because one thing that's not supposed to happen *does* happen doesn't mean *kulaku*. Dwarfs aren't supposed to fly, either. Does that mean I'm going to sprout *wings* ?"

"What it *means* ," Delain shot back, "is that maybe the ancients didn't know as much about magic levels and keystones and maybe the Scourge itself as they thought they did. As *we* thought they did." He turned to Ifollis. "Is that what you're getting at?"

The wizard smiled faintly. "It's an interesting hypothesis," she said. "Though I wouldn't advise going directly to the Council with it."

"But the gauge--"

This time it was Delain who cut Karena off. "Maybe the gauge is measuring something other than what we *think* it's measuring. It's possible. Maybe the same thing that damaged *Azhûn* is affecting the gauge's reading."

"Yes, by the Passions," Karena roared. "The Horrors!"

"Maybe," Delain said quietly. "Maybe it *is* the Horrors. Maybe the Scourge *is* continuing outside. And maybe it's *not* , maybe it's all come to an end, and we just don't know it, locked in here."

"Wishful thinking!" the dwarf spat. "Moonbeams. Feel-good lies. If you want to pretend that the Horrors are all gone, that nothing's going to happen when *Azhûn* collapses ... well, *do* it, I don't care. *Chase* moonbeams and stardust. But don't expect me to chase them with you."

"And if you want to join the Brothers of Night, that's your prerogative as well," Delain snapped. "But don't expect *me* to become a stormcrow with you.

"Listen," he went on earnestly, trying to ignore the murderous rage flashing in the dwarf's eyes. "Karena, *listen*. I'm *not* chasing stardust. I'm choosing to consider a new alternative, that's all, just to see where it leads. Maybe it's not true, maybe nothing will come of it ... but what if it *is* true?

"Think about it," he urged. The killing rage was fading from Karena's eyes, but her expression was still as closed as a magically sealed door. "*Think* ," he stressed again. "If the Scourge hasn't ended--if the Horrors are outside--when *Azhûn* collapses, we're all dead, every one of us. We can't escape, we can't repair the keystone, we can't establish alternate wards. We have no chance of survival, none at all.

"So where's the possible harm in at least *considering* the possibility that the Scourge is over?" he asked rhetorically. "In at least following the consequences through to their logical conclusion?"

"*What* conclusion?" Karena demanded.

"I don't know, but that's the point, don't you see?" He ground his teeth in frustration. "Maybe it'll all come to nothing. Maybe the whole discussion's meaningless in the first place. Listen. I'm not suggesting we do anything stupid, like throw open the Dawngate just on the off chance all the Horrors are gone. All I'm saying is we should *consider* this new possibility. *Think* about it, work it through. When we've thought out all the consequences, and maybe found a way to test it, *then* we can consider acting on it. Not before."

He gestured helplessly. "What's the alternative, Karena?" he asked again. "I don't want to give up hope and join the Brothers of Night. And I don't think you do either. Am I right?" He met her gaze and held it. "Well, am I?"

It was Karena who looked away first. "Never get into an argument with a troubadour," she grumbled.

There was something new in the air. Delain could sense it as soon as he stepped from the Scytha Stair onto the Level of Astendar. They were back among the occupied levels of Kaer Moar, yet the weave of the invisible, intangible fabric that was the kaer's society had shifted, altered. He could sense the change clearly. In the hurried, almost frenetic movements of the people in the crowded corridor; in the strange, new tenor of the background hum of conversation; in the taut expressions, the wide eyes, of those who brushed past him.

At his side, he felt Gaylear Cleareye stiffen. Even without troubadour training, she'd sensed the change too, he knew. He felt her eyes on him. Turning, he met her gaze and shrugged as if to say he didn't know what was going on, either ...

Over the diffuse mutter of countless conversations, suddenly Delain heard a single voice rise and echo throughout the corridor. He couldn't make out the words, but the anguish in the voice was so clear, his own heart twinged in sympathy. For an instant, the background hum faltered, then strengthened once more, abnormally fast, as though silence itself were something fearful.

Out the corner of his eye, Delain spotted a familiar face. He reached out and tapped the passing figure on the shoulder. "Urghul, do you have a moment?"

The ork he'd addressed stopped and quirked a thick eyebrow quizzically. But he followed when Delain led him into the shelter of the Scytha Stair. "Delain *Vadorn* ," Urghul said in greeting, calling Delain "Song-brother" in the orkish tongue. He eyed Gaylear curiously. "And your large friend, *Vadorn* ?"

"Gaylear Cleareye, meet Urghul Jhigola--Urghul 'Handfast.'" Delain smiled. "Urghul's one of the better lutenists you'll find in Kaer Moar. He made both of my uncle's favorite instruments."

Urghul chuckled deep in his throat. "And I'll make one for you, *Vadorn* , when you're ready to set aside that toy"--the ork touched Delain's harp--"for a real instrument."

Delain's pleasure at the old argument was fleeting. He took Urghul's shoulder and drew him even further away from the jostling crowds of the corridor. "My friend," he began quietly, "I don't like the feel of the air. Something's changed, and it disturbs me. What is it?"

Urghul didn't answer at once, instead fingering a chipped tusk while he looked deep into Delain's eyes. "You don't know?" he said at last.

Delain shrugged. "Would I ask you if I knew?"

"But you met with the Council," the ork said.

Fear twinged in Delain's chest. He tried to keep anything from showing on his face, but the change in Urghul's eyes told him he'd failed.

"Ah," the ork breathed. "It's like that, is it?"

"How many people know about it, Urghul?" Delain asked.

The ork laughed harshly. "Oh, not many. Only those who aren't deaf." His fierce-looking smile faded. "Is it true, Delain? Is it true what they say?"

"What do they say?" Delain saw the flash of anger in his friend's face, and quickly went on, "I really don't know what the rumors are saying, Urghul. I've had ... *other things* ... on my mind."

"Mmm." The ork nodded, mollified. "What they say is we're chin-deep in *quaalz* , my friend, that's what they say." He chuckled, though his expression remained grim. "They say the Brothers of Night have the right of it, and we're never going to get out of here--not us, or our children or our grandchildren, or their children either. *Never*. The Horrors are going to eat our hearts, and the only question remaining is when.

"And more--anybody who can read the old tales should have *known* all this long ago. That's what they're saying."

Delain blinked. "Known this?" he echoed. "How?"

"Prophecies, *Vadorn* , that's how. Some of the old tales--they're prophecies. And so many of those prophecies have already come to pass, there's no reason to believe the rest won't, too. That's what they say, at least," Urghul added, almost as an afterthought.

"*What* prophecies?"

Urghul shook his big head. "That's your area of expertise, Song-brother, not mine. All I want to know is, should I believe it?"

Delain couldn't meet his friend's earnest gaze. "Who are 'they', Urghul?" he asked. "Who's talking about this? Is it Kolban Darkways?"

The ork's thick eyebrows shot up. "Darkways? *That* twilighter?" He snorted. "No, it's the troubadours--*some* of the troubadours," he corrected quickly. "They're talking about the prophecies and claiming the Council knows all about them. That somebody just brought the Elders proof that the prophecies are true." He reached out and tapped Delain on the chest. "It's not common knowledge that *you* visited with the Council, *Vadorn* ," he said, his voice low but intense, "not yet. But that will change. You can be sure of that."

Delain nodded. "I appreciate your honesty, Handfast, and your help."

Urghul smiled, showing his chipped and yellowed tusks. "*Ravalaaar* ," he responded politely, rolling the vowel deep in his throat--*It is nothing of note.* Then his smile faded again. "Can I expect the same honesty from you in return?" he asked softly. "Is there truth in what they say?"

Delain sighed. "I don't know, Urghul," he replied honestly. "I simply don't know."

Delain sat in one of the meditation alcoves off the High Concourse, legs folded under him tailor fashion. From the finely carved marble benches, he could see people passing in the Concourse beyond. He could see from their expressions that several recognized him and obviously wanted to speak to him. But, at least in this, the Traditions were still strong: only the greatest of personal emergencies could bring someone to interrupt another's contemplation in a meditation alcove.

The young man's mind raced, thoughts tumbling over one another in confusion. Too much had happened in too few hours, too many new realizations and revelations, fears and imaginings. He sighed.

Urghul had said it was the troubadours--*some* of the troubadours--who were spreading this talk of prophecies in the old tales. As Delain had heard those words, unbidden his memory had brought up and replayed for him the many ancient tales and lays and epics he'd memorized as an apprentice. Now,

reviewing them again, he confirmed the conclusion he'd reached in those first few moments: none of the old tales could possibly be interpreted as prophecies of doom, as support for the Brothers of Night. Certainly, there were evocative passages, allusive references to lost and forgotten events and persons. Certainly, someone with the right mental bent *could* find meaning in some of those passages, meaning that the original writers hadn't intended. That was one of the characteristics of poetry, after all, that the reader could bring his own meaning to it. Yet still, Urghul Jhigola had implied more than that, hadn't he? That there was some kind of unifying thread running through several--perhaps many--of the old tales, a thread that could be interpreted as prophecy. But that just wasn't true, Delain told himself again. There was no such unifying thread ...

... Not in the versions of the tales he knew, at least.

And there was the key, wasn't it? There was the central issue. Maybe there was such a thread in other versions of the tales. The ones remembered by the "doomsayers", perhaps?

That was the only conclusion that made any sense at all, he decided. The troubadours that Urghul Handfast referred to had to be the "doomsayers," that other "school" of the High Art. In their versions of the tales--their *perverted* versions, he thought--there might be something that echoed the events of the moment.

And that was something else to think on, wasn't it? He frowned. How did the doomsayers *know* about those events? He had his suspicions, of course ...

A familiar figure passed in the Concourse beyond. In an instant he was on his feet, hurrying out of the alcove after the retreating figure. "Marta," he called. "Marta, a moment?"

The black-haired woman stopped and turned to face him. "Goodman Evenstar," she said. Her expression and her tone were polite, but distant.

He stopped a couple of paces away from her, and gave her a mannerly half-bow. "Goodwoman ... " He hesitated. "I'm sorry," he confessed, "I don't know your family name."

"Aravey," she said. "Marta Tethys Aravey."

"Goodwoman Aravey," he said, repeating his half-bow. "Do you ... would you spare me a moment's conversation?" He saw doubt cloud her blue eyes, and hurried on, "It's important--to me, at least. Would you do me the courtesy?"

He saw her consider, then come to a decision. "Why not?" she allowed, with a slightly aloof smile. She glanced at one of the hour-candles in its sconce. "I could do with some refreshment. If you'd care to join me in that ... ?"

"Whatever you like," he told her.

Delain raised his earthenware goblet in a toast. "Your health, goodwoman Aravey."

Marta mirrored his gesture with her pewter flagon. "Your health," she echoed. Again he saw a train of thought flash across her face. Then she smiled. "And you may as well call me Marta."

"Delain." He brought the goblet to his lips, and tasted the sweet wine he'd selected. She took a healthy swallow from her own drink--orkish *hurlg* , which had surprised him--and puffed out her cheeks in a satisfied *pah!*

Delain indicated her flagon. "I don't know how you can stand that stuff," he remarked with an exaggerated frown of distaste.

The dark-haired troubadour laughed, a clear, ringing sound that echoed from the low ceiling of the wine shop. She set the flagon down on the table before her, and inspected its contents as if seeing them for the first time. "An acquired taste," she admitted.

"But why would anyone *want* to acquire it?" he asked, spreading his hands helplessly. "Fermented grain and *animal fat* ? Brrr ... " He feigned a shudder.

Marta shrugged. "When I drink something, I like to *know* I'm drinking it."

"With *hurlg* , you'll *keep* knowing it for hours afterward."

She chuckled again, and took another swallow of the sharp-smelling concoction. When she set the flagon down again, her expression was serious, her blue-eyed gaze steady on his face. "I take it you're interested in conversation with a little more import than tastes in beverages," she said dryly.

Delain nodded. "Yes." He sipped at his wine to give him another moment to order his thoughts. "Tell me about the prophecies," he said at last.

Marta raised a delicate eyebrow. "I thought that might be your interest." She settled her elbows on the table before her, and interlaced her long fingers. "What do you want to know, Troubadour?"

"Well ... " He paused again, then, "Where *are* they?" he asked simply.

Marta blinked, as though his question was just gibberish. "Pardon me?"

"Where *are* they," he repeated, "these prophecies you and your colleagues are talking about?" He sighed, seeing her expression change. "I'm not taunting you. I really want to know."

She shook her head, her black shoulder-length hair swinging. "Throughout many of the old lays, the old canons," she replied shortly. "They're obvious enough ... to anyone with eyes to read them, and the wit to understand."

With an effort, Delain suppressed an angry rejoinder. "Pretend I *don't* have the wit," he suggested dryly. Then, suddenly, "Did Kolban Darkways point them out to you?" he asked.

The woman's blue eyes flashed. "*Nobody* had to 'point them out' to us."

"But your"--he chose his words carefully--"your *understanding* of them ... that's new, isn't it?"

The anger in her face diminished, but didn't vanish. "True," she allowed, a little grudgingly perhaps. "But only as events have developed have we understood the references." She paused. "And in answer to your first question ... yes, goodman Darkways *did* point us in the right direction, *did* set us on the course, though I don't think he realized it at the time. But after that aid, we teased out the prophecies woven through the tales without help." She shrugged. "Why would his opinions carry weight anyway? It's not as if he's a troubadour, after all."

You might be surprised, Marta, Delain thought grimly, remembering his uncle's comments on the old nethermancer's political ambitions. "Yet you accepted his guidance at first, didn't you?"

"He's one of the oldest inhabitants of the kaer," she shot back, "quite probably *the* oldest. Doesn't it make

sense to take advantage of the memories of someone who's lived for centuries?"

Delain shook his head slowly. She was arguing in circles, he thought, contradicting herself. But with an effort he kept his peace.

"Once we realized where to look," Marta went on, "the prophecies were obvious."

"*Where* ?" Delain demanded again. "Prove it to me."

She gripped her flagon tightly, staring into the curdled-looking liquid it contained. He could see she was ready to storm away, angered by what she took to be his intransigence.

He struggled to keep his tone reasonable. "Give me an example, Marta, please," he urged. "So I can understand, too."

For a long moment she considered. Then she nodded once. "An example, then," she conceded. "From the *Canon of Ages* ." She closed her eyes and recited in a pure, clear voice:

Stillness at last, and stillness ever more,
That shall be the first sign. And when the
Overarching pattern cracks and shatters,
And the laughter of childhood is stilled at last,
Then that shall be the second.
And darkness shall fall, and the walls will collapse,
And the night shall be forever.

"It's obvious enough, isn't it?" Marta asked rhetorically. "'Stillness at last'--that's *Fala'an* . The gauge has stopped moving. 'The overarching pattern cracks'--*Azhûn* is starting to break down. 'The laughter of childhood is stilled'--stillbirths." She shrugged. "And as to the rest, how else could you interpret it? The wards collapse, the kaer falls. The Scourge never ends."

"No." Delain shook his head firmly. "No, that's not it. That's not how the Canon of Ages goes at all. I learned it like this:

Stillness at last, and stillness ever more,
At the end as at the beginning. And when the
All-encompassing pattern comes to crack and shatter
And the laughter of childhood is but a memory,
Then the cold wind blows through the soul.
And darkness at last shall fall, and the temple crumbles,
And the night shall be forever.

"*That's* how the passage runs," he stressed. "There's nothing prophetic about it, Marta. It refers to aging: loss of memory and the realization of mortality. The 'temple of the spirit'--the body--crumbles in death. It's got nothing to do with kaers or wards or Horrors. Certainly, it's a powerful passage, but it's not prophetic."

Marta snorted. "You misremember the old words," she snapped.

"Those are the words as I was taught them."

"Those are the words as your master taught you, granted," she countered, "and as his master taught him. But words change over the generations. Everyone who's ever played 'tale-chain' knows that."

Delain ground his teeth in frustration. I *knew* she'd talk about "tale-chain", he told himself. It was a children's game where one child whispered a story to another, who whispered it to another, who whispered it in turn to another ... until the tale returned to the original teller, and the players got to laugh over how the story had changed as it passed down the "chain". Game or no, it was an important concept in the High Art. Troubadours were taught to beware of "generational drift", of the way an old saga might change, sometimes drastically, as it passed down from one generation to another.

"And what about you, Marta?" he asked. "How can you be sure *your* words are the true ones? 'Tale-chain' doesn't play favorites."

She smiled triumphantly. "Confirmation," she replied. "And from someone who's lived for centuries, someone who remembers the words the way they were taught to him when he was a stripling. True, the words might have drifted *before* he learned them, but the tale-chain's so much shorter."

"Kolban."

"Yes, Kolban."

"But he's not a troubadour."

"Of course not," Marta agreed. "Which is why we give little credence to his attempts to interpret the words he remembers. But you don't have to be a trained troubadour to remember a tale told at your mother's knee, do you?

"And it's not as if the *Canon of Ages* is the only example," she went on firmly. "It's just the first one that came into my mind--and maybe the most blatant. There are examples throughout the old works."

"Give me another one, then."

Marta gave a long-suffering sigh. But again she closed her eyes and recited:

The Enemy is at the gate. As clear as the Four Tones,
His trumpets ring. The strongest of keystones will crack,
The strongest of gates will weaken.
How can the wards hold, when none can reinforce them?
Words from the past tell of coming doom ...

"No," Delain cut her off sharply. He recognized the passage immediately as *The Siege of Landis Nar* , a martial epic dating back to the Orichalcum Wars. "No," he said again. "'Carried on the *four winds* , his trumpets ring. The strongest of *foundations* will crack. How can the *walls* hold.' *Those* are the true words."

Marta's blue eyes snapped open. She shrugged with studied indifference. "That's how *you've* learned them, I'll grant you that."

"If it's prophecy, then, how do you interpret the next section?" Delain asked. "The part that says:

Arrows fall in our parade grounds
And the banners of the houses--brilliant
With the multiplicity of colors of our honor--are afire.
Camped without are the hosts of the Foe,
And his axes hue to the ground trees, old
When keep and walls were young,

To build his war engines.
The sky is black as night with the smoke of his cook fires,
And the rivers run red with the blood of our heroes.

"What's prophetic about *that* , by the Passions?" he demanded. "Scourge it, Marta, it's the tale of a *battle* , a besieged city that fell to the army of Cara Fard centuries before this kaer was built. Where's the prophecy?"

"In the words as you remember them?" Marta's voice was heavy with irony. "Nowhere, I grant you that. But in the words as they *should* be remembered ... ?" She shrugged again. "They're clear to anyone who takes the time to read between the lines."

Delain drew breath to argue, then stopped. He was missing something here. A thought--vague, barely formed--nagged at the edges of his mind. Something Marta said ...

Yes, that was it. "'The Enemy is at the gate'," Delain recited, "that's what you said, isn't it? 'As clear as the Four Tones, his trumpets ring.' What do you think that means--the 'Four Tones?'"

Marta blinked. She took another mouthful of *hurlg* . "I don't know, exactly," she admitted after a moment, the combative edge gone from her voice. "It's not as if it's important."

"Maybe it is." Delain reached into his pouch, and pulled out his copy of the fragment he and Grais had been trying to decipher for so long. He unrolled the parchment on the table between them, turning it so Marta could read his dwarven translation of the original trollish characters. With his forefinger, he traced three specific lines, reciting them from memory:

To follow the Four-Fold Way
And the stream of the ten thousand,
To see the Four Colors, to hear the Four Tones,
And to touch the weaving of the weaver.

"The Four Tones," he stressed. "What does that mean?"

Marta shrugged. "I already said I didn't know." She gave the parchment the most cursory of glances. "What's this, something you're composing?" She limned the last word with a strange hint of irony, almost scorn, as if composing were somehow beneath the dignity of a "true" troubadour, Delain thought.

He looked at his counterpart in speculation for a moment. Then he rerolled the parchment and returned it to his pouch. "Nothing." He tossed a couple of hexagonal copper coins on the tabletop as he rose to his feet. "Enjoy your *hurlg* ."

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Eight

"Master Corbyan, can we *please* get back to the business at hand?" Grais Evenstar struggled to keep his voice reasonable, his expression free of the anger that burned in his chest.

The Chair of the Council of Elders blinked in surprise, then dropped his gaze uncomfortably. "Yes, yes, of course," he mumbled. Then he raised his voice. "I remind you, Masters, Master Evenstar has the floor."

Grais looked around the Council table. Two of the chairs were vacant, unheard of, at least during his brief tenure on the Council. Both Vervian Nenn and Baltris Freehold had simply not shown up for today's meeting, not even forwarding their regrets to the rest of the Council. Among those Elders who *were* present, only a few seemed to have their minds on the matter under discussion. The rest were either sunken in their own thoughts, *morbid* thoughts, judging by their expressions and poses, or were committing the gross breach of protocol and simple politeness by carrying on whispered conversations.

The troubadour sighed. What have we come to here? he asked himself, struggling against the gloom that threatened to overwhelm him. We're supposed to be the guiding lights of the kaer--the wise, the Elders, aloof from the petty emotions that sweep through the populace we're sworn to guide. That was the theory, at least, but for the first time he was starting to truly understand how much that was fiction.

"You have the floor, Master Evenstar," Deny Corbyan reminded him.

"Thank you, Master Corbyan." With an effort, Grais brought his churning thoughts under some semblance of control. "Master Talbott, I asked about ... *irregularities* ... in the kaer's food production. That *is* your area of responsibility, is it not? Perhaps you can explain to the Council what's happening."

Jenna Talbott, a human, and one of the few women on the Council of Elders, shrugged uncomfortably. "Nothing untoward, Masters," she muttered, glancing around the table.

Grais cut her off before she could continue. "I'm sorry, Master Talbott, but that's not what I've been hearing. Production has dropped by almost one quarter over the past week, isn't that so? From what I understand, the level of absenteeism in the growing spaces is considerably higher than normal. Perhaps you could explain to the Council what's being done to deal with this problem."

Talbott flushed, unable to meet Grais's piercing gaze. "I haven't seen the figures that the good Master Evenstar refers to," she mumbled.

And why not? he wanted to ask. That's your responsibility, not mine, yet I'm more informed of what's going on than you seem to be. But he kept his silence.

Normally, news that the kaer's food production was suffering would have shaken the Elders. After all, operations in the kaer's growing spaces--massive caverns where farmer-adepts, assisted by elementalists, grew the magically altered food crops that fed Kaer Moar's inhabitants--was the most vital, and arguably the most delicate, facet of kaer administration. Yet today few seemed to care, so deeply were they sunk in their own personal concerns.

"Perhaps you should examine the reports," Grais suggested pointedly. "And then perhaps you could enlighten the rest of the Council as to how you intend to address the issue."

"What does it matter anyway?"

Grais turned at the sullen voice to his right.

Thom Wyrrel sat slumped in his chair, his shoulders drawn in, chest sunken. His unseeing eyes were fixed on the table before him.

"Pardon me, Master Wyrrel?" Grais asked sharply.

Wyrrel didn't look up. "What does it matter anyway?" he repeated. "I can understand why the workers prefer to spend time with their families. We can *all* understand, if we think about it." He sighed deeply. "Better to make peace with oneself and one's loved ones in these, the last days." To his shock, Grais saw nods of agreement from around the Council table. "I suspect that's where Masters Nenn and Freehold are," Wyrrel continued. "And perhaps where we *all* should be."

"What *is* this?" Grais demanded, letting anger tinge his voice for the first time. "'Last days', what *is* this?"

Wyrrel looked up from the table and fixed Grais with his sunken eyes. "*You* should know, perhaps more than any of us, Master Troubadour."

"But I *don't* know," Grais shot back. "None of us know. Masters," he said, raising his voice and sweeping his colleagues with his gaze, "we are the Elders of Kaer Moar. Are we to let despair counsel us, now when our people need our leadership more than ever before? Are we to let"--he hesitated, searching for the right words--"the maunderings of doomsayers, of stormcrows, counsel us to abdicate our responsibilities?"

It was Vilus Sand who spoke. "More than just maunderings, Master Evenstar, you should know that."

"But I don't *know* ," Grais repeated urgently.

"Kolban Darkways does."

Grais turned to address Wyrrel directly. "Goodman Darkways claims he knows, *Master* Wyrrel. The Brothers of Night and other stormcrows *claim* they know. But any twilighter can *claim* anything, without proof. Do we believe them?"

"Proof?" Wyrrel echoed. "Don't we have enough proof? I remind you of your own nephew's testimony, Master Evenstar. Would you gainsay *his* words? The despair that tears the heart out of the kaer. The prophecies ... "

"Prophecies that *create* what they foretell," Grais snapped. "Despair feeds on despair ... even if there's no real *basis* for that despair."

"But the prophecies are more than despair, they predicted the damage to *Azhûn* ."

"If they exist, Master Wyrrel," the troubadour countered. "*If* they exist. I haven't seen anything that looks even *vaguely* like prophecy."

"Other troubadours disagree with you," Vilus Sand pointed out grimly.

"And they could be wrong in doing so."

"And could *you* be wrong?" Wyrrel interjected.

Grais fought back the urge to scream. "Yes," he said evenly. "Yes, I *could* be wrong. But since there's no logical reason to choose one belief over the other--no overriding evidence--where's the wisdom in choosing the interpretation that counsels despair? *That's* what I ask you, Masters."

He forced himself to sit back, to relax his tense muscles. "And I also ask that we address ourselves to the issue at hand. Do I have your agreement?"

He looked around the table pointedly. None of the other Elders would meet his gaze.

After a long moment, Master Corbyan nodded. "Master Evenstar has asked a question, Master Talbott," he said. "Would you please answer?"

It's all falling apart around us. And faster than I'd ever have imagined possible.

Delain sat in the Harper's Gallery, wondering if it was the site of an old battle as the fragment hinted. He looked down through the intricate arches down onto the High Concourse on the level below. In one of the squares, where the Concourse widened out to twice its normal extent, he saw a group of people surrounding a troubadour. He could see the man's lips move, could see his fingers plucking at the silver strings of his harp, but he could hear neither words nor melody over the background hum of the crowded Concourse. But he didn't have to hear to know what he was singing, did he?

The "prophecies", that was all anyone wanted to hear these days. He shook his head. He just didn't understand it ... or maybe didn't *want* to understand it. By the Passions, he'd *tried* . He'd tried to counter the ... well, the *damage* , the doomsayers were doing to the kaer. He'd gone out among the populace, among the people he'd known since his birth, and tried to sing them songs, weave them tales, of hope, to counter the tales of despair. But most simply hadn't wanted to hear them. Where once he'd been able to hold them rapt, entranced almost, for hours with his voice and his Art, now they turned away before he'd finished. Instead, they'd sought out the doomsayers like Marta and her colleagues, to hear the will-sapping "prophecies" of the last days.

Why, in the name of the Passions? he asked himself for the thousandth time. What is it about people that makes bad news--devastating news--so attractive?

The changes in the kaer weren't limited to taste in the songs and tales people wanted to hear, either. The malaise had spread to most other facets of kaer life as well. Even in worship, once the most private and personal aspect of life in Kaer Moar, the taint was starting to show. In the first week after Delain had first seen the damage to the keystone, he'd witnessed an upswing in devotion to various Passions--a public outpouring of worship, a plea for comfort and aid. At first, it was Garlen, Passion of Hearth and Healing, whose overt worship had seen the most growth. But then the trend had expanded, to encompass Mynbruje, Passion of Justice, and even to Thystonius, Passion of Valor, and Vestrial, Passion of Cunning and Innovation.

At first, he'd considered the increase in Passion worship to be a positive sign. After all, despair was the

greatest threat to the kaer--so he and Grais believed--and didn't the burgeoning worship of the Passions imply *hope* within the population? To ask the Passions for aid meant that the worshippers believed there was still some hope of that aid coming to pass.

Yet that optimism had dwindled to naught. As quickly as it had grown in strength, the faith in the Passions diminished again. Over the next week, despair once more took hold. "The Passions have deserted us" became the phrase heard the most. Only those who followed the ideals of Dis, Passion of Order, still professed their faith in public.

And even that was becoming dangerous. A new ... movement ... seemed to be spreading through the kaer, a chilling undercurrent that frightened Delain more than he cared to admit, even to himself. A group, a philosophy, whose members called themselves "the Traditionalists" had emerged. At first, the "Traditionalists" had seemed to comprise the same people as the Brothers of Night. Both Delain and Grais had assumed that the "Traditionalist" movement was just the Brothers under a different name, and had expected its appeal to remain limited to the stormcrows and twilighters who'd been so attracted by the Brothers' fatalism in the first place.

Not so, apparently. Within a week, the size of the Traditionalists faction had expanded to several times the size of the Brothers of Night. Yet, even if those estimates were correct, the Traditionalists were still in the vast minority of the kaer's population. Among the thousands dwelling within Kaer Moar, maybe a hundred were "active" Traditionalists. For their relatively small number, however, their actions were disproportionately significant.

Just since Grais and Delain Evenstar had first taken note of the Traditionalists, the group had been responsible for destroying countless symbols representative of the Passions. Simple glyphs carved into the doors of personal residences--symbols calling down the protection of Garlen on the home--had been defaced with hammer and chisel, sometimes while the owner of the home looked on, afraid to intervene. Many of the small statues representing the Passions scattered throughout the kaer had been thrown down or smashed. Tapestries depicting the Passions--some dating back to the early years of the kaer--had been burned or slashed. All at the behest of the self-styled Traditionalists. Or maybe not all, he corrected, remembering events in the Hall of the Passions two weeks before. Those youths weren't Brothers of Night or Traditionalists, yet they'd been defacing the shrines. Probably some of the recent events were the actions of people who didn't follow the tenets of the Traditionalists, but who were just venting their frustration and fear in the only way they knew.

If it were only the physical symbols of Passion reverence that had attracted the ire of the Traditionalists, that would be bad enough. But things didn't stop there. Over the last couple of days, Delain and Grais had heard reports of questors being harassed, even physically assaulted. And not just questors, either. Even people who, by their garb perhaps, could be *mistaken* for questors, were suffering. To profess faith in the Passions--even to speak out against the wave of fatalism gripping the kaer--in public was to invite anger, and outright violence, from any Traditionalists or their sympathizers who happened to overhear. Delain frowned, remembering the old dwarven woman who'd tugged on his jerkin sleeve as he'd started to weave an ancient tale of hope, a woman who'd warned him that he might suffer a beating if any Traditionalists heard him "selling false and empty hopes", as they styled it.

And, yet again, there was more. As if the kaer didn't have troubles enough, he thought morosely. An old human--Lyske Milne, his name was, and one of the first people to embrace the philosophy of the Brothers of Night, even before the emergence of the Traditionalists--had taken his own life. Not unheard of, of course, particularly among twilighters. As far back as Delain could recall, most of the kaer had held to the philosophy that the old dwarf, Rockharrow, had expressed to him two weeks before at the funerary procession for his granddaughter: that suicide was spurning the gift of life granted by the Passions. Still, though, the aged and the infirm *did* sometimes take their own lives when living became a burden to them, and few had the heart to censure them for it.

That wasn't the case with Milne, though. Lyske Milne might have been old--into his eighth decade--but he'd also been hale and hearty enough to make himself a gold-plated nuisance to the Council ... and to anyone else he could convince to listen to him. Many had considered Milne a twilighter, almost pathological in his paranoia and delusions. But *Milne* hadn't considered himself so, and he'd always seemed to draw great satisfaction from flaunting his ... eccentric ... beliefs in everyone's face. For this reason alone, his suicide was noteworthy enough.

Even more noteworthy, however, were his stated reasons for taking his life--explained in loving detail in a hand-written testament he'd passed on to a fellow Brother of Night. Abiding by Milne's last wishes, the Brother publicized the testament through every channel available to him: by posting magically duplicated copies in public places; by passing copies among those troubadours Delain classed as "doomsayers", for public recitation; by trying--unsuccessfully--to have it read into the official record of a Council meeting; and by reading it aloud himself to anyone who'd listen. Before Milne's body had cooled, his reasons for leaving this life were more widely known than any belief he'd held throughout his long life.

"I take my leave of Kaer Moar willingly," so read a portion of the rambling testament, a copy of which Delain had taken down from the wall of the High Concourse, where it had been posted. "As the Prophecies make clear, my doom is at hand. Better by much to die cleanly, by quick dagger thrust, better by much to go before the Passions with my soul untarnished."

As if Milne's testament weren't clear enough on that central point, the Brothers of Night and many of the Traditionalists had elaborated on it at great length. Better to take one's own life, they argued to anyone who'd stand still long enough to listen, than to be tortured for eternity by the Horrors ... or, even worse, to be *tainted* by them and used as tools against other innocents. And now even some of the "doomsayer" troubadours were taking up the refrain, too, weaving tales hinting that suicide *could* be a worthy alternative to becoming corrupted.

Delain glared down at the troubadour in the Concourse, with his little knot of listeners. Stormcrows, all of them, he thought. Suddenly, surprising himself, he spit on the floor to his left, the gesture of contempt he'd learned from Karena Hearthrock.

He almost jumped out of his skin as a second gobbet of saliva struck the basalt beside his. He turned to see two shapes silhouetted against the light-quartz illumination in the gallery--one stocky, the other tall and massive. "How long have *you* two been there?" he asked acidly.

Karena laughed. "Long enough to sense your mood. I guess sometimes you don't have to be a trained troubadour to read the signs."

Delain had to chuckle at that. "Sometimes," he agreed.

The dwarf's smile took on a slightly mean edge as she looked around pointedly. "Awfully lonely up here, isn't it, especially for a troubadour? What's the matter, goodman Song-brother, are your tales and ditties out of fashion with the people these days?"

Delain blinked, at a loss for exactly how to respond to the swordmaster's gibe.

But then, as quickly as it had appeared, the vicious edge vanished from her expression. "I take that back, Delain," she said quietly, surprisingly contrite. "You didn't deserve that." She shrugged, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. With an insulting gesture--*buunda* , an ork would have called it--she indicated the other troubadour below. "It's *him* and his kind I'm angry at." Her smile came back, this time self-deprecating. "It's just that you're closer," she finished ironically.

Delain reached out and patted his friend reassuringly on her thick arm. "It angers me too," he admitted. "But what is there to do about it? And *don't* suggest," he put in quickly, "that we go down there and beat

his head in, all right?"

Karena snorted. "What do you think I am, a t--" Quickly, she changed what she'd obviously been about to say. "--A *turgma* ork?" she finished, a little lamely. Beside her, Delain heard Gaylear's soft rumble of displeasure, but he was glad to see that the troll seemed unwilling to make an issue of Karena's almost-insult.

Quickly, to defuse a potentially tense situation, he patted the marble bench beside him. "Join me?" he asked, carefully including both women with his expression. When they were seated, he lowered his voice to a whisper, and asked, "Have you thought any more about my ideas?"

"*What* ideas?" Karena snorted. "That the Horrors are just a tale to scare children?"

Delain sighed. "I never suggested the Horrors were *never* there," he explained patiently. "All I ever said was that we don't know they're *still* out there."

Karena laughed roughly. "The ghost of twilighter Milne might be a tad irked to find out that's the case." Again, her boisterous humor vanished. "I don't know, Delain," she said, and for the first time he could hear something close to despair in her voice. "Maybe you *are* right. Who knows?" She shrugged. "Maybe everything *out there* "--she gestured at the rock overhead--"is all sweetness and light. Maybe the sun always shines and the cold winds never blow, and the Horrors are just a bad memory, and the Passions walk the earth in all their glory.

"But *we'll* never know it. Not unless the gauge drops again ... and does it right *quick* . Think about it, Delain, Gaylear," the dwarf urged. "Can you see the Council agreeing to open the Dawngate? *Va* ," she spat, jolting Gaylear with her use of a common trollish expletive. "Can *you* imagine Corbyan and Sand--and *Wyrrel* , by Thystonius!--doing that? *I* can't.

"So what happens?" Karena went on hotly. "If you're right, Delain, *nothing* happens, that's what. We sit in here and we wait. Maybe the wards collapse, but we're not going to know it. *I* can't feel the wards, and neither can you. Nobody's going to know it when and if they give out. If the Horrors *aren't* out there"--she stressed the words--"*nothing ... at all ... happens!* Not in our lifetimes, at least.

"Maybe one day *Azhûn* crumbles to dust and rubble, and the Horrors *still* don't come through the walls to drink our blood. Maybe on that day, the Elders--whoever they happen to be at that time--might decide to crack open the Dawngate and take a look outside. But you and I are going to be dust long before then, Delain. And you, too, Gaylear. *All* of us are."

The dwarf sighed, a deep, soulful sound. "I could live with that, Delain, don't get me wrong. I'm reconciled to living out my life in here, we all are. Certainly, it irritates me"--she laughed--"no, it *burns* me like acid poured in an open wound, that you *might* be right, that we *might* be able to open the kaer early, open it *now* . But if that's not how it turns out, I can live with it. What I *can't* live with is that all the people we know will go to their graves thinking *he* "--she shot out a thick finger, trembling with anger, to point at the doomsayer troubadour--"has the right of it."

Delain nodded slowly, digesting what the dwarf had said. He kept his gaze on the throng passing by below them, rather than looking into her face the way he wanted to, rather than trying to search out the sources of the emotions she'd just revealed. She was more complex than he'd suspected. There was much more to her than just anger ...

"You can't live with it." Gaylear's deep voice jolted both Delain and Karena from their reveries. "Can the *kaer* live with it?"

Karena scowled, and Delain saw her draw breath to ask a sharp question. He managed to get his own

question in first. "Can you tell us what you're thinking, Gaylear?"

The troll shrugged her massive shoulders. "There's more to it than Karena implies," she said quietly. "I don't think *nothing* will happen even if Delain is right. Something is *bound* to happen, something bad."

Karena looked patently unconvinced, but Delain nodded slowly. He thought he could see where she was going, but all he said was, "What do you mean?"

Gaylear shrugged again. She looked at him shyly--a totally incongruous expression from someone weighing a quarter of a ton. "You see it too, Delain. The kaer can't live with *this* ." It was her turn to point at the doomsayer. "You've heard about the suicide cult?"

Delain nodded. "Lyske Milne."

"Yes, but more than Milne."

Delain felt the cold touch of fear on the back of his neck. "More?"

"Two more, today," Gaylear confirmed grimly. "Both old--a lot of people would call them twilighters--both human, and both thought to be members of the Brothers of Night. A third tried to take his life publicly--to slit his own wrists on the Great Gyre--but passersby stopped him before he could"--she grimaced--"finish the job. He's with the healers now."

"Why haven't I heard about this?" Delain asked, his voice sounding somehow alien to his own ears.

"Probably because you spend your time moping here." Karena gestured around at the gallery.

Delain ignored her. "Today, you said?" he asked Gaylear.

"In the past three hours."

"And were there testaments like Milne's?"

"I don't think so," the troll replied after a moment. "But I don't think it matters. Other Traditionalists have publicly said they would do the same thing--kill themselves--before they'd allow themselves to be ... " She trailed off, as though unwilling to put into words the consequences to which three, almost four, kaer-dwellers had preferred death.

"She's right," Karena confirmed, "I've heard the same thing. Not among the dwarfs--not yet," she added grudgingly, "but not just among the Brothers and the Traditionalists. I've heard it from people I'd normally say had their heads screwed on right ... except that now they're talking about slitting their own throats."

"What about Kolban?" Delain wanted to know.

Both women shrugged. "He's not saying anything on either side," Karena answered. "He's just keeping to himself--locking himself in his rooms, according to some, because he doesn't want to see the trouble he's caused."

"And preparing himself to meet the Passions, according to others." Gaylear's voice was as cold as a breeze from the depths of a crypt.

"But the troubadours aren't hanging back," Karena almost spat, pointing again at the figure in the Concourse, "*him* and his cronies. They're dragging up the most dispiriting words I've ever heard pass the

lips of a troubadour--and *that's* dispiriting," she added sharply, with a strange look at Delain--"and couching them as 'teaching tales'. And people are just eating them up."

Delain nodded--forcing himself to ignore the dwarf's strange parenthetical comment; he had more important things to worry about at the moment, after all, he reminded himself. So Kolban had dropped out of sight, he mused. Did that mean Grais was right, that Kolban had realized it was easier to start a "movement" than to control it once it was started? If the elven nethermancer were still playing his political game, what would be his next logical move?

"What do you say we do, Delain?"

Surprised by the dwarf's softly voiced question, he turned to Karena ... and saw that Gaylear was watching him expectantly, too. Who elected *me* Elder here? he wanted to ask. Instead, he forced himself to concentrate. "I don't know *what* we do," he admitted after a long moment. "You described the problem all too well, Karena. The Council isn't going to vote to open the Dawngate, or if by some chance they do, I can't see that the populace of the kaer would let them do it, based on the way things seem to be going." He sighed. "And that's the only way to find out if the Scourge is over.

"*Horrors* ," he swore sharply. "I don't know if *I'd* let the Elders open the Dawngate even if they voted on it. Maybe the Scourge *isn't* over, maybe the Horrors *are* still out there. But how can we tell? It's like ... like checking to see if an old crossbow will work by having someone fire it at your eye." He stared at his boot as he scuffed at the floor.

"Maybe there *is* a way."

Delain looked up, shooting Gaylear a quizzical glance. "What do you mean?" he asked the troll. "You're thinking of the gauge?" Seeing Gaylear quail from the intensity of his gaze, he said, "It's all right, Gaylear, really. We're just looking for ideas here. If you can think of anything--*anything*--that might help." He shrugged. "Even if you *don't* think it can help, but it's something we might not have thought of ... *tell* us. Please."

For a moment, Gaylear chewed on her thick upper lip. Then she flashed Delain the innocent smile of a child. I've got to remember how young she is, he reminded himself firmly. It's hard to think of someone nine feet tall as more or less a child, but that's what she is.

"I don't know if it's important," Gaylear began. Both Delain and Karena had to lean forward to hear her words. "It's something I've seen in the Closed Levels."

"What?"

She looked away, her momentary confidence already starting to ebb. "I'm not sure, Delain."

"Well, what do you *think* it might be?"

The huge archer fixed him with her dark eyes. "A door," she said simply.

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Nine

Gaylear led the way, down into the depths of the kaer. They took the Scytha Stair again, down into the chill, still air of the Unnamed Levels, then deeper still. Delain tried to keep track of the flights they'd descended, but quickly lost count. Gaylear never faltered, though, never stopped to check her location or bearing, even when they left the stairway--not at the bottom, Delain noticed to his surprise, not at *Kha'averen*--and struck out into the echoing emptiness of the vacant level.

The troll carried a light quartz held out before her, silhouetting herself against its light. Beside Delain, Karena bore an oil lamp on a carry-stick, as if unwilling to trust to magic. Delain himself had brought nothing but his belt-pouch and his trusty harp, which bounced against his hip as he tried to match Gaylear's pace.

In general floor plan, the level they were traversing almost perfectly matched *Kha'averen* , at the base of the kaer, he realized quickly. The only major difference was that, instead of the circular chamber that contained *Azhûn* , on this level the centerpiece was an open, echoing square. As they strode across it, Delain closed his eyes for a moment and imagined it filled with talking, laughing people at chairs and tables, where friends could share a glass of wine (or *hurlg* , he thought with a grimace); stalls selling sweetmeats; and strolling troubadours, their pure voices providing the descant to the continuo of conversation and movement. When he opened his eyes again a moment later, he had to blink back tears.

Right through the center of the level Gaylear strode, human and dwarf struggling after, trying not to be left behind. Almost ten minutes from the Scytha Stair, the troll began to slow down, for the first time tracing their route with more care. For a moment Delain stopped in his tracks, trying to picture where they were. If this had been *Kha'averen* , the level that housed *Azhûn* , they'd soon be reaching the boundary of the kaer itself, the untrammeled basalt of the volcanic cone, laced with true earth woven into the first layer of the wards. Then, satisfied that he knew their location--roughly, at least--he hurried to catch up with the others.

Less than a minute later, Gaylear herself stopped--sharply enough that Karena almost rammed into her broad back. In the light of light quartz and lamp, Delain could see the rough, undressed stone that surrounded the kaer. "Well?" he asked softly.

Gaylear turned her large head from side to side, as if seeking landmarks too subtle for a human's eyes. After only a moment, she strode off again to the right, following the subtle curve of the kaer's outer boundary.

She stopped again maybe thirty yards further on, and pointed. Moving out from behind the shielding bulk of her back, Delain looked where she was indicating.

"That's your door?" he asked slowly.

Gaylear snorted, and reached out to rap on the door--wooden, bound with blackened iron--with a huge knuckle. "Of course not. *Through* here." She reached down and twisted the large, knarled doorknob. The door swung back at her push, the iron hinges complaining, but nowhere near as loudly as Delain had expected. As they passed through the portal, he glanced down and saw the scattering of rust on the floor. He nodded with understanding: Gaylear had already forced the door open, some time in the past. Then he shuddered, thinking how stiff the hinges must have been after centuries of disuse.

The light of Gaylear's light quartz showed what lay beyond the door--a low-ceilinged, narrow corridor. Its walls were the familiar basalt that made up the rest of the kaer, but the stonework here was rougher, less precise and polished, than elsewhere. The corridor bored deep into the rock, as straight as a spearshaft, for as far as the magical light reached. Delain blinked. Was it his imagination, or did the floor slope slightly upward?

"Where does this lead?" Karena's voice was gruff with doubt.

"To the door I told you about," Gaylear answered simply.

"I didn't know anything like this existed."

"Nor I," Delain answered the dwarf. He gestured at the corridor. "Shall we?"

"I'll lead." Before either of the others could object, Karena had strode through the door and started down the corridor. Delain and Gaylear exchanged amused looks, then quickly followed her.

The corridor *was* sloping upward, Delain recognized quickly. The muscles in his calves made that abundantly clear after only the first few dozen yards. The ceiling was even lower than he'd guessed, no more than a hand's-span above the crown of his head. That meant Gaylear had to bend almost double, laboring along in a painful stooped walk.

"How far?" he asked the troll.

"Nearly one hundred yards."

Delain frowned. How could that be? He tried to imagine the layout of the kaer, how it fit into the roughly conical volcanic mountain. Mentally, he drew a line from the lowest reaches of the kaer, tracing it upward at a slight angle. A hundred yards ... that might extend beyond the mountain itself.

What were they getting themselves into here? Suddenly uncomfortable, he looked at the black, sweating stone overhead. Did the wards extend this far beyond the kaer proper? He shook his head after a moment's thought. Foolish, he chided himself. Could a rusty-hinged door have held back the Horrors for four centuries?

He breathed deeply, feeling the chill of the air, surprisingly damp, almost fetid, in his lungs. It was strange, he thought. He'd always considered the sense of age that hung over the Unnamed Levels to be partially a consequence of their painfully dry, dusty air. Here the air was cold and moist, yet he felt the age of the corridor even more overwhelmingly.

In the light of Karena's lamp, he saw the passage open out, expand into a square-walled chamber at least ten feet high. The dwarf stopped, and he heard her grunt of surprise. Behind him, Gaylear sighed with relief as she could at last stand at her full height.

"This is it?" Delain asked softly. The troll nodded. Hesitantly, he stepped around Karena for a better look at their destination. Lamp and light quartz cast deformed and shifting shadows on the wall.

The door before him was made entirely of a black metal that Delain suspected was oil-tempered iron. Unlike any other door he'd seen, it was circular in shape, about five feet in diameter. The metal surface was crisscrossed with bolts and latches and other locking mechanisms--but not hinges that he could see. *Which means it opens* away *from me, into ... well, into whatever's beyond.* Slowly, he reached out toward the metal door, then stopped, his fingertips an inch or two away. He imagined he could feel the door *radiating* cold, the way a heatstone radiates warmth. Of course cold didn't radiate, he told himself. But that's how it felt. Suddenly uncomfortable about touching the ancient artifact, he let his hand drop back to his side.

"So," Karena broke in gruffly. "Where does it lead, Gaylear?"

The troll just shrugged.

"Outside?" the dwarf pressed.

"How would I know?" Gaylear answered finally.

"Delain?" Karena asked.

He didn't answer, didn't even look at her. All his attention was suddenly focused on the circular frame surrounding the door. He hadn't noticed it at first ... or, at least, hadn't attached any significance to it. In the shifting light of lamp and light quartz, he'd initially taken it as just a slightly raised region of rock, rough like the rest of the wall, surrounding the door: reinforcement of some kind to support the hinges, perhaps. Now he could see differently.

The frame was perfectly circular and about as broad as the span of Delain's open hand. It continued unbroken all the way around the door, forming a kind of curved sill beneath it. As he looked closer, he could see where the "roughness" he'd perceived came from.

Around its complete circumference, the frame was etched with runes and magical symbols, graven in lines often no thicker than a human hair. He gasped with wonder as he stared at the symbols, tracing with his eye the complex interlacings. Astounding, he thought. It was as though the whole frame was a single intricate symbol of unbelievable complexity, yet each glyph and rune comprising it was simultaneously independent. How many artisans worked for how many years to complete this?

And what in the name of the Passions was it?

"It's magical. *Strongly* magical." Karena said, and Delain turned to stare at her in surprise. The dwarf had set the base of her carry-stick down, and was gazing at the metal door, while her free hand toyed with the brooch holding her cloak in place.

He blinked in puzzlement ... then in understanding. "A charmsense brooch?" he asked, and smiled at Karena's answering nod. "I didn't know you had that."

Karena shrugged. "It's hardly everyday wear," she admitted, "but I thought it might be useful today."

"It's useful, all right," Delain turned back to the door. "*What's* magical, though?" he mused. "The door itself, the locks ... or maybe the frame?"

"*All* of it," the dwarf shot back. "Door, frame, locks ... even the wall itself"--she tapped her brooch--"if

this is any judge."

"What form does the enchantment take?"

Karena snorted. "You're expecting a little much from a chunk of jewelry, don't you think?" she asked sarcastically.

"Then what about the symbols around the frame?"

"They're magical, that's all I can tell you. Scourge it, *you're* the troubadour, the one who reads all the old *quaalz. You* tell *me* what it means."

Delain let his eyes trace the circumference of the frame once more. He could recognize many of the symbols and runes--ancient Throalic script, alchemical signs for the four true elements, combined with arcane glyphs from a dozen cultures and traditions, but as to the overall meaning, he couldn't even guess.

"Set the matter of the enchantment aside for a moment," Delain said slowly, voicing his thoughts as they came into his head. "Does the structure itself mean anything to either of you?"

"It's a door," Karena pointed out in the tone of voice she might use to communicate with a particularly dim-witted child.

Delain gave a long-suffering sigh. "*Besides* that." He shook his head. "There's something familiar about this," he muttered after a moment, "something I've seen before ... no, not seen, heard about, or *read* about. It reminds me of something ... "

Karena snorted. "It reminds *me* of a door, that's--" Her voice cut off in mid-sentence. In the glow of the light quartz, Delain saw her gray eyes widen suddenly. "A mining caisson." The words were the softest of whispers.

"Yes." Yes, that was it, Delain realized. A dwarven mining caisson. He'd never seen one, of course--there was no need for anything like that within Kaer Moar--but some of the old Throalic tales spoke of them. "Tell me about caissons," he said.

"Mining lore." Karena was still staring wide-eyed at the door. "Very old. Not often used, but still important. Miner-adepts used them sometimes when they were excavating chambers where poisonous gases seeped up from the rocks below. Mostly stoneworkers used them when they were working beneath the water--to shore up the face of a dam, for example, like the ones around Lake Ban. Iron chambers, sometimes reinforced with true earth, with iron doors--two of them, with a kind of"--she hesitated, casting about for the right word--"of *antechamber* between them. Pneumatic caissons," she repeated. "They were a way to keep water away from the work face ... and those toxic gases, too. Keep the air pressure in the caisson high enough, and nothing could get in."

Delain nodded slowly. "Yes, I've heard about that. Didn't they cause some kind of disease?"

"The 'twists,'" the dwarf confirmed. "Obsidimen call it *querithelniasticanum*. Miners suffered from it when they worked in caissons at great depths. Upon returning to the surface, they'd sometimes suffer muscle cramps, crippling pains that could make them curl up into strange shapes trying to lessen the agony in their joints. Sometimes they'd die in great pain.

"But it wasn't a disease, though, not in the sense you mean," Karena stressed, "just a consequence of the pressure under which they were working."

Delain sighed. "Interesting, I suppose. But what could that have to do with *this* ?" He indicated the

circular iron door.

Karena fixed him with her sharp gaze, a complex expression on her face. "Pneumatic caissons used doors like this, two of them, so you could enter the caisson without letting the pressure out or water in.

"So you could enter the caisson ... or leave it."

Delain felt the breath stop in his lungs. *By the gift of Astendar* ... "I think we need an expert," he whispered.

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Ten

Delain stopped before the iron-bound wooden door, and turned to the tall, slender wizard at his side. "Before we go any further," he said quietly, "I need to ask you to keep what you're about to see to yourself. Will you agree to that?"

Peg Ifollis smiled grimly. "I'd keep it to myself anyway, even if you hadn't asked," she said. "These days, there are certain things it's wiser not to talk about--not if you enjoy living, at least."

Delain raised an eyebrow. What had been going on in the corridors to make her say that? he wondered. But then he put the thought aside. "Thank you, goodwoman Ifollis," he said with a formal half-bow. He nodded to Gaylear and Karena again, each with her own light source, and they started the long climb up the slanting corridor.

Delain couldn't help a small smile at Ifollis's indrawn breath when she saw the iron door and its intricately carved frame. Eyes wide in wonder, she stepped forward for a closer look. "Upandal," she sighed. Then she turned back to Delain. "What is this?"

He chuckled. "That's what we want you to tell us," he said.

"I see. Yes, I see." Ifollis turned back to the door, gesturing to Karena and Gaylear. "Bring the lights in closer, and I'll see what I can do."

The cold, damp air had chilled Delain to the bone by the time the tall wizard stepped back from her examination of the door frame. "Fascinating," she sighed. "Totally fascinating." She smiled down at the young man. "Thank you for showing me this," she said earnestly.

Karena snorted. "What *is* it, that's what we want to know," she grunted. "And *don't* say 'a door.'"

"Well, it *is* a door," Ifollis pointed out simply--earning herself a foul look from the dwarf. "A door that's locked with more mundane and magical locks than I've ever seen in one place," she went on quickly. "That makes it vitally important." She gestured at the complex locking devices. "All this, it's very expensive--not only in terms of money, though that too, but in terms of the energy and effort that went into it." She shook her head. "I don't know how many wizards must have sacrificed their life energy into sealing this."

"Blood magic?" Gaylear asked, a tinge of fear creeping into her voice.

"Probably," Ifollis confirmed. She sighed again. "It was different then. Back when the kaers were first built, people didn't think blood magic was innately Horror-tainted. The ancients used it in so many ways.

Blood magic can be so ... *useful* ."

A sudden, chilling thought struck Delain. "Have *you* used blood magic?" he asked.

Peg Ifollis hesitated. Answer enough, Delain realized grimly. "Yes," she admitted after a moment. Then, hurriedly, elaborated, "In very limited forms, of course. Just for experimental purposes."

Delain could see the shock and fear on the faces of his two friends. He felt it too. Everyone in the kaer was taught that blood magic was anathema--Horror-corrupted in its very nature, and an affront to everything the Passions stood for. And yet ...

And yet Ifollis admitted to using it herself--and she wasn't Horror-tainted ... was she? And the ancients themselves, those who built this kaer to protect their descendants, they'd used it, too.

Was *that* why the keystone was starting to fail? Delain wondered suddenly. Because the ancients who built it used corrupted blood magic to create it?

With an effort, he forced his attention back to the tall, fair-haired wizard standing before him. "So the door is sealed with blood magic," he repeated, trying to keep his superstitious dread from sounding in his words. "What about the frame? What about the symbols?"

"Wards," Ifollis answered quickly, seeming relieved to leave the other touchy topic. "*Powerful* wards, not the kind of thing you'd use to seal ... oh, say a treasure house or something so mundane."

"Like the wards that protect the whole kaer, then?" Delain suggested.

Ifollis nodded. "In a way ... Like them, but *distinct* from them. The threads woven into *this* "--again she gestured to the circular door--"they're connected with the pattern of the kaer's wards, but only peripherally. They draw some of their power from the same source--they channel it through *Azhûn* , for example--but not all." She gazed at the frame in wonder. "There's more true fire bound into this one region of stone than *anywhere* else in the entire kaer. *That's* where these wards draw most of their power."

"So ... " Delain hesitated. He felt thoughts shift around in his head, like pieces in a puzzle, right on the verge of making a clear pattern. "So why would the builders do something like this?" he asked slowly. "Why set up a different set of wards ... a *distinct* set of wards?"

"Because they *are* distinct," Ifollis answered. "Distinct," she stressed again, "with only limited interaction with the main wards."

And, with a mental *click* , the pieces slipped into a new orientation in Delain's mind. "By the Passions," he whispered. Could *that* be it?

Ifollis was smiling, as was Karena, as if both women already knew what he'd just realized. Gaylear was staring at him as if he'd lost his mind. "What are you talking about?" the troll asked.

Yes, it had to be ... "These wards ... " Delain gestured at the door. "You can deactivate them, can't you? Without deactivating the main wards protecting the rest of the kaer?"

Ifollis nodded, her smile broadening. "That's how I interpret the symbols."

"But why?" Gaylear was shaking her large head in befuddlement. "Why would you want to? Why ... when the Horrors could just come in through this door--down this corridor--as soon as you drop the wards?"

It was Karena who replied. "Two doors," she said quietly. "Like a caisson." She shot a sharp, questioning look at Ifollis.

The wizard nodded again. "That's how I interpret it," she agreed, her calm voice contradicted by the sharp interest, almost excitement, in her eyes. "There *is* something beyond this door. I can trace the threads woven from *these* wards to another set beyond them. They're connected by a ... well, you might call it a 'waiting ward.' If these wards are deactivated, some of their power is transferred to the wards beyond ... and vice versa, I think." She shook her head in awe. "An amazing piece of thread-weaving," she pointed out. "There's nobody alive today who could come close to weaving something like this."

"But you're sure that's what's going on?" Delain asked.

"As sure as I *can* be, all considered."

Delain's mind was churning with thoughts--assumptions, conclusions, guesses. "You said these wards were connected--*peripherally* , you said--with the keystone ... " He spoke slowly, carefully following the logical connection in his mind. " ... connected with the main wards. What would happen to them if these were deactivated?"

"The main wards would still stand," Ifollis stated. "They'd lose some of their power, but they'd still stand."

"What about *Azhûn* itself?"

"Yes," Ifollis said, answering the question he hadn't quite asked. "Changing the flow of power in the weaving *would* damage *Azhûn* --not much, but enough. The decay *would* be accelerated."

"By much?"

The wizard's sharp gaze seemed to cut into him. "I don't think so, but I have no way of knowing for sure."

"*Guess* , then."

Ifollis shrugged, dropping her gaze. "Not significantly," she said, but there was a tentative tone to her voice that Delain didn't like.

"Define 'significantly,'" he pressed.

"I think--*think* , mind you--it would diminish the life of the main wards by ... well, I'd *guess* by a month. Maybe more, but not *much* more."

Delain absorbed that in silence. A month, he thought grimly. And how long would *Azhûn* survive as things are? A year at most, that's what Peg had said before, possibly as little as two months. He swallowed through a throat that seemed suddenly tight, constricted. "Would you know how to deactivate these wards?" he asked, feeling the eyes of his friends on him, unable to meet their gaze. "To deactivate them so the ... the--what did you call it?--the 'waiting ward' would function properly?"

He had to strain to hear the wizard's answer: "Yes."

"How?"

Ifollis reached up and pointed to three of the glyphs carved into the basalt frame. "These are the words of power," she explained. "This one is *feh* , this one *thark* , and this one *berram* . Touch the door with both hands, and repeat those three words. The waiting ward will take care of the rest."

Delain nodded slowly, still unwilling--*unable* --to meet the eyes of the others. "I thank you, goodwoman Ifollis," he said formally, "I am in your debt." He hesitated. "I just want to remind you again--"

The wizard cut him off. "If anyone learns of this, it won't be from *my* lips." She frowned. "I think I'd be happier all around if *I* didn't know about this."

For the second time in a month, Delain Evenstar faced the Council of Elders. Or what was left of it, he thought. Four of the large carved seats were vacant, and judging by the expressions of the Councilmembers who'd bothered to attend, they had little enough interest in official matters. He forced himself to breathe deeply, calmly--forced himself to ignore the miasma of despair, of *futility* , that seemed on the verge of choking him. He looked across the table at his uncle.

Only Grais seemed untouched by the fatalism that was tearing the heart out of the kaer ... and even he seemed suddenly aged, Delain thought, bowed under the weight of his responsibilities. Still, his uncle was able to flash him a quick, reassuring smile.

"Masters," Delain began again, struggling to keep his voice even and reasonable, "*think* about it. It's the only option we've got."

Corbyan looked up from his rapt examination of the tabletop. His eyes were sunken, the pouches of flesh beneath them as dark as bruises. "What is this 'caisson?'" he asked.

Delain stifled a sigh. He'd already covered this ground twice ... "As I explained to the Council, it's two doors, each of them magically sealed, that allow access to the outside world without destroying the wards that protect the rest of the kaer.

"*Think* about it, Masters," he stressed again, "the builders would surely have developed something like this--a way to confirm that the Scourge was over before opening the Dawngate and counteracting the main wards. How could they *not* have foreseen this necessity?"

"We have *Fala'an* ," Vilus Sand pointed out peevishly.

"Of course," Delain agreed, "of course we have the gauge. But would the builders have felt comfortable trusting entirely to that? A single source of information? *No* ," he answered himself firmly, "it would be too much of a ... a *gamble* , Masters, to risk the lives of everyone in Kaer Moar on that single source of information. No," he repeated, "it makes much more sense to provide an exit route, if you like, a way to send scouts outside the kaer to confirm that the Scourge was over. Only then--*only* then--would they wind the Horn and open the Dawngate."

"Why do we know nothing of this?" Sand snapped. "Why would the builders--if they thought this through as you claim--leave it to a handful of taboo-breaking rogues to find this out?"

With an ultimate effort, Delain fought back the angry rejoinder that sprang to his lips. "I can't answer that, Master," he allowed. "But other information *has* been lost over the centuries ... "

"So *you* say," the dwarf shot back. "But should we value your opinion on something like this when you continue to deny that the prophecies are real, when anyone with eyes can see the truth of--"

Corbyan raised a hand, cutting the truculent dwarf off. For a moment, the Chair of the Council of Elders seemed cloaked in the nobility he'd once exuded as a matter of course. "We've covered this ground, Master Sand." Then he seemed to shrink in on himself once more, becoming nothing but a very old, very

tired dwarf. "Tell me again, goodman Evenstar," he said slowly. "If we *were* to choose this course, how would it affect *Azhûn* and the other wards? It *would* affect them, would it not?"

Delain nodded, grudgingly. "It would, Master Corbyan," he admitted. "But I say again, it would only speed up a process that's already well advanced ... and only by a month--not a great degree, in any case."

The dwarf raised a silver eyebrow. "A month would seem like a great degree to a man condemned to die in two," he pointed out gruffly.

"To use your own analogy," Delain fired back quickly, "wouldn't the condemned man consider gambling that one month on the possibility of a full pardon?"

Corbyan smiled, a wintry expression. "Your nephew has your debating skills," he said archly, turning his cold gaze to Grais then back to Delain. "And yet your argument fails to sway me, goodman Evenstar."

It was all Delain could do to remain in his chair. "But--"

Corbyan raised his hand again, cutting him off as peremptorily as he had Vilus Sand. "The decision is the Council's to make, goodman Evenstar," he said dryly, "not yours." He looked around the table. "Your information is interesting," he continued more conversationally, "but as yet you do not convince this Council that the gamble is worth taking."

"But a month--"

"A month is a month." The dwarf's voice easily overrode Delain's. "And time is a precious commodity.

"Attend me, master Evenstar, and listen to one of your own troubadour's fables. A criminal was condemned to death, but he importuned the king who brought down the sentence to give him one last chance. 'Lock me away in your tower,' the condemned man said, 'with a spinning wheel and some straw. If, by the end of a year, I have learned how to spin straw into gold, you will let me go. If not, you will execute my sentence.'

"The condemned man's friends cried out, 'How can you ever spin straw into gold?'

"And he answered them, 'Many things can happen in a year. The king may die. I may die. And maybe I'll learn how to spin straw into gold.'

"Do you take the wisdom of that tale?" Corbyan asked, leaning across the table toward Delain. "In the time remaining, perhaps *Fala'an* will move again. Perhaps the Scourge will come to an end. How can we, in all conscience, diminish--even by a day--the time we have for this to come to pass?"

The dwarf sat back in his chair, his face becoming once more an expressionless mask. "Thank you for your information, goodman Evenstar," he said levelly. "You may leave."

Old men! Delain raged silently. Our fate's in the hands of old men too frightened to make a decision. Scourge it! He reached out and pounded one fist against the basalt wall of the Scytha Stair, then had to laugh softly at the futility of the action. Just as futile as trying to pound sense into the Council.

At least the Council hadn't adjourned, he reminded himself. The Councilmembers might still be discussing his proposal, and at least Grais was with them, to try subtly to convince them of the wisdom of Delain's suggestion. It wasn't much of a hope--somehow he couldn't imagine Sand, or even Corbyan, changing their minds--but it was the only one he had at the moment.

If we follow the Ways and Traditions, it's the only hope we have ... And that was an interesting thought, wasn't it?

The Scytha Stair was deserted as he made his way down toward the Level of Astendar. No, not quite deserted, he noticed idly. There was someone else in the narrow stairway, a middle-aged man climbing slowly up toward him. The man nodded greeting as they passed on one of the narrow landings. Delain smiled in answer, an instinctive gesture--he didn't feel much like smiling.

I'll have to talk to Gaylear and Karena, he told himself as he started down again. Maybe they'll ...

He didn't know what it was that warned him--a sound, maybe, the scuff of a bootsole on the stone stair. Fear--sudden, chilling--struck at his heart. As he started to turn, the blow slammed into the side of his head, a numbing impact that drove him forward off his feet. He heard himself cry out as he stumbled, missing his footing on the basalt stair, and fell forward. Slowly, it seemed, the black stone came up to meet him. Then all he knew was chaos and pain, brutal impacts against arms, shoulders, and back, driving the air from his lungs. Redness, blackness, then redness again swirled around him as he tumbled, bouncing off the hard stone.

A final, stunning impact against his back and skull, and all was still. The pain wracked him, blurring his vision, paralyzing his muscles. He was on his back, lying on one of the landings, barely clinging to consciousness. He tried to move his head, and groaned at the pain.

Movement--movement above him. Involuntarily, his eyes locked onto the motion.

It was the same man, of course, the same one who'd just passed him, who'd struck Delain, knocking him down the flight of stairs. Through the blurring of tears, he saw the weapon in the man's hand--a sap, a small leather sack filled with pebbles, or with sand. Delain tried to bring his hands up to shield his head from another blow, but his traitor body refused to obey the orders of his mind.

Glancing around quickly, the man knelt beside him. Apparently satisfied there were no witnesses to see him, he began to search roughly through Delain's garments.

Delain tried to protest, tried to roll aside or push the man away. Vainly. He blinked his eyes to try to clear them ... and in that moment, the weapon in the man's hand had changed, seemingly magically, from a sap to a broad-bladed knife. Delain tried to yell, but all that came from his lips was a thin, keening sound.

Quickly, the man reached down and used the sharp blade to saw through Delain's leather belt, tearing the young troubadour's pouch free. Then Delain saw a thin smile spread across his assailant's face. Gleaming in the glow of the light quartz crystals, the blade moved toward his throat. Delain Evenstar knew he was looking into the soulless eyes of Death himself.

Voices, laughter--children's laughter, from further down the Scytha Stair. The patter of running footsteps on the basalt stairs.

Above him, Delain saw his assailant's eyes widen, watched them as he came to a decision. The man's knife was gone as magically as it had appeared, and then he was on his feet, running up the stairs back toward the Level of Vestrial.

Again Delain blinked, and again the view changed. Now there were two faces looking down at him, twisted into expressions of childlike concern. Suddenly the swirling blackness was back, and he felt himself fall headlong into it.

The children had wanted to take Delain to a healer, of course, when he'd come back to his senses scant moments later. They'd helped him to his feet, and he'd run a quick mental check of his body. He'd no doubt be sporting nasty bruises all over, including a tender lump on the back of his head, but nothing seemed broken or permanently injured. He'd thanked the children profusely for their help, then made his painful way out onto the Level of Astendar.

Who? he asked himself. And again, who? He tried to build up a mental picture of his assailant, but it was no good. He simply hadn't paid any attention to the figure climbing the stairs toward him. And, after he'd found *abundant* reason to pay more attention, his vision had been too blurry to pick out significant details. All he could recall was brown hair, brown eyes, pale skin, simple jerkin and trous, a medium build--in other words, a description that could fit fully half the human males of the kaer. Maybe he'd recognize the man if he saw him again ...

But maybe not even then, he had to admit. *Unless I see the cold, soulless look in those eyes again* ... He shuddered at the thought.

He reached back to feel the size of the bump on the back of his head, wincing as his fingers touched it. Yes, it was still swelling. Webs of pain radiated from the lump, a spiderweb of agony spread over his entire head. Cursing softly, he reached down for his beltpouch. Didn't he have some salve that might take away some of the pain?

But no, he remembered immediately, he didn't have his beltpouch any more; the assailant had taken it. Salve was gone, along with his money and various other personal items he preferred to carry with him.

Why? He shook his head, then stopped quickly as the spiderweb of pain throbbed more intensely. A robbery? Crime wasn't much of a problem in Kaer Moar--not *this* kind of crime, at least. In the main, violence was limited to a drunken troll taking a swing at a boon companion who'd infringed on the drinker's *katorr* . Still, there were occasional cases of filching, of purse-cutting. Was that all this was?

No, Delain realized quickly, there was more to it than that. He reached back and stroked the polished wood of his harp. An instrument of this quality, with its silver strings and inset gems, was worth *much* more than anyone would carry in a belt-pouch. His attacker would have known that.

He sighed. His head was still pounding, making reasoned thought difficult. Maybe it would all make more sense after a good night's sleep.

By the time he reached the door of his and Grais's quarters, he felt as exhausted as if he'd sprinted up the Great Gyre from the foot of the kaer to its peak. He turned the handle and pushed the door open. "I'm home, Uncle," he called out.

The common area of their suite was empty, silent. Maybe Grais hadn't returned from the Council yet ...

But no, there was his cloak tossed over the back of a chair. Delain smiled grimly. It must have been an exhausting session to make the normally fastidious Grais not bother to hang his cloak up. And to leave a pile of books on the floor, rather than on the shelves where they belonged.

Seeing the door to Grais's bedroom shut, Delain briefly considered going to his own room and just slumping down on the bed, to sleep until his body decided it was time to wake. Then he shook his head--at the cost of another hot flash of pain. He needed to tell his uncle about what happened. Not that Grais could do much about it, but as a Councilmember he should know. Gently he rapped on the door.

No answer from within. Maybe his uncle was sleeping. He rapped again, a little louder. "Grais?" he called softly.

Again, silence. *Well, best leave him to his sleep. He's earned it.* With a smile, Delain started to turn away.

The sound from the other side of the door was quiet, so quiet he almost missed it. A soft, pain-wracked groan.

"Grais? *Grais!* " Delain pounded on the door, then grasped the handle. The door was unlocked, and he pushed it wide.

He saw his uncle at once, sprawled across the bed. The large man's face and bald pate were pale, almost blue, and his lips were white. His eyes were wide, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

He's dead! was Delain's first thought. But, no, dead men didn't groan. He rushed across the room, dropping to his knees beside the bed.

Grais's chest was rising and falling, rapidly but shallowly. From this distance, he could hear the breath hissing in and out of his uncle's lips. Sweat beaded the older troubadour's brow. Without thinking, Delain wiped it away, gasping in horror at the chill feel of his uncle's skin.

"Oh, *Scourge* ... " He looked around the room wildly and his eyes lighted on the drinking goblet on the small bedside table, near Grais's outflung hand. The goblet had fallen, pouring a slick of rich purple liquid across the tabletop. Feeling suddenly as cold as his uncle's skin, Delain dipped a finger into the congealing liquid, raised it to his nose, then touched it to his lips. He grimaced, and spat. "Oh, Scourge," he breathed again.

In an instant he was on his feet, sprinting out into the corridor, looking for help.

LOST KAER

by

Nigel D. Findley

Chapter Eleven

"Poison, of course," Delain said tiredly. "Extract of glandroot--a strong decoction of it, too."

"How is he?" Gaylear asked. She was sitting on the floor in tailor fashion, her back against the door to Delain's bedroom. Karena was pacing back and forth across the common room like a caged beast.

"Not dead," the young troubadour answered. Then he smiled--or tried, at least--to rob his short answer of any offense. "He was still breathing when I found him. Lucky timing. He *stopped* breathing ten minutes later, but the healer was already here, and she started his lungs again. She says he's strong, but he's a long way from out of danger yet. The first twelve hours are the key. If the heart's strong enough to last that long ... " He shrugged.

"But that's not the worst of it," he went on bleakly. "Glandroot is ... it's *insidious* . And it doesn't just attack the body. His mind ... " Delain swallowed a sob, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. "It damages the mind, too. *Kvaltch gnarr* , orks call it. 'Mind-ripper.'" He shook his head again, trying to keep control of the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. *My uncle--my* father *in all but name ...*

"What happened?"

He looked up through tearing eyes at Karena. "Did he try to kill himself, you mean?" he demanded, voice harsh. The dwarf stopped in her pacing, and he saw the real pain in her eyes, pain echoing his own. He dropped his gaze. "I'm sorry, you didn't deserve that."

"That never even occurred to me, Delain," Karena said, her voice as soft as he'd ever heard it.

"What happened?" he echoed tiredly. "I don't know. I don't know what *could* have happened. *Scourge* it!" he spat. "It's the not knowing that hurts, almost worse than anything else."

The dwarf was pacing again. "There was no sign of a struggle?"

"None." He blinked, his eyes suddenly drawn to Grais's cloak draped casually over the back of a chair, the untidy pile of books on the floor beside it. Would Grais have just tossed his cloak there, *would* he just have left the books scattered rather than re-shelving them? *Did* he?

Another thought struck him suddenly, jerking him to his feet like a marionette on strings. *Those books ... They came from ...*

***There!* He turned to the section of the bookshelf where the books belonged, where Grais so fastidiously**

filed them. There was a gap in the serried lines of volumes on the shelf, but something else was missing as well. A sealed ironwood case. He dropped to his knees before the disturbed shelf, then pawed madly through the pile of books. No, it was definitely missing.

"The fragment," he breathed.

"What?"

It took Delain a couple of minutes to explain to the dwarf's satisfaction what the parchment fragment was, why the troubadours had both considered it potentially important. "It was stolen," he concluded. "Somebody came in and took it. And that same somebody could have ... " His eyes teared up again as he remembered the image of Grais, blue-skinned and white-lipped, sprawled on the bed. He couldn't finish the thought.

"You said you had a copy, though," Karena reminded him.

"Yes, I ... " He reached down to his beltpouch ... finding only the cloth of his jerkin. "No, the copy's gone, too." Quickly, he filled his friends in on the attack in the Scytha Stair.

When Delain was finished, Karena was mumbling ferocious curses under her breath. Gaylear just watched him, puzzlement in her dark eyes. "You think they're connected, don't you?" she asked.

"What else am I supposed to think? Coincidence?"

The troll shook her large head. "No, not coincidence." She paused. "But *why* , Delain? What can be so important about the fragment--important enough to kill, or *try* to kill, two people?" He could see her thoughts racing, could sense her mind's frantic attempts to understand. "And why *now* ? You've had the fragments for, what, a year?"

"About that, yes."

"And during that time, nobody made any effort to take them from you. Why now, that's what I don't understand."

Karena had stopped her muffled cursing, but was fingering the hilt of her sword meaningfully. "Just tell me *who* , that's all I care about at the moment," she rumbled.

Despite himself, Delain had to smile. "I think maybe the 'why' might answer the 'who,' too," he said. "I just wish I had some idea of where to start."

"What now?" the dwarf asked after a long moment.

"Revetting," Delain responded wryly, using a dwarven mining term that meant, roughly, "damage control." "*We* know Grais didn't try to take his own life. But what will other people think?" He left the second, more important question unspoken: *And what will it do to the mood of the kaer?*

He should have known what it would do to the kaer's morale, Delain realized grimly as he walked along a broad corridor toward the Healers' Quarter: trample it into the mud. It had never really occurred to him to wonder how the general populace of the kaer viewed Grais Evenstar. Now he had ample evidence.

One of the most optimistic, hopeful members of the Council of Elders--that's how the kaer had viewed his uncle. And now that symbol of light and hope had tried to take his own life.

Trampled kaer morale into the mud? Delain thought grimly. More like cut it to ribbons, burned it to ash, then trampled it into the mud. He could see from the uncomfortable glances people threw him as he hurried by that the news had already spread throughout the corridors and chambers. They knew who he was, they knew who his uncle was--and what he represented--and they knew what had happened just hours before. He could almost *feel* the spreading desperation. He wondered grimly if the doomsayers had found a prophecy that predicted *this* ?

The Healers' Quarter was, fittingly enough, on the Level of Garlen. At some time, early in the life of Kaer Moar, the name might have been appropriate. Maybe a few centuries ago, there'd been enough healers in the kaer to warrant their own quarter. No longer, he thought sadly. Yet another change for the worse. Today, there were few people who even called themselves healers, and fewer still who actually warranted the name. Still, out of tradition, the "want-to-bes" and the "almosts" and the "never-weres" made what living they could in this part of the kaer.

The door to the Great Hospital--yet another sadly inappropriate name--stood open, as it always did. Out of habit, he made a quick gesture of respect to Garlen, Passion of Hearth and Healing, before stepping inside, and saw only too clearly the sharp, disapproving glances it earned him from passersby. He shrugged. If a small observance like that could somehow improve Grais's chances of recovering, he'd gladly suffer a lot more than disapproving looks.

Patrin Gavort--"Patrin the Bonesetter"--worked in the chambers nearest the main door of the Great Hospital, a labyrinth of tiny rooms and cubicles, storage spaces, and closets. The old man was struggling to keep a parchment unrolled on his desk when Delain entered the room the healer considered his personal "office." With an amused sigh, he crossed to the desk and held down a corner of the parchment.

Patrin looked up, blinking his surprise. He was a small, stunted figure, a human who looked decades older than his sixty years. His pale, watery eyes seemed to have trouble focusing on Delain's face. Then, as he recognized his visitor, his wrinkled face split in a gap-toothed smile. "Delain," he said. "Good day to you."

"And to you, Master Healer. How is he?"

The Healer's ingenuous grin faded. "Unchanged," he said. Then, "I assure you I'm doing everything within my power to--"

Delain cut him off with a comradely pat on the arm. "I'm sure you are, Master Healer," he reassured the old man, "it never occurred to me to think otherwise, I assure you." He paused. "But he *has* passed the twelve-hour milestone you mentioned?"

"True enough, that is true enough."

"Has he shown any"--Delain searched for the correct word--"any responsiveness?"

"Is he awake, you mean? No." Patrin shook his bald head emphatically. "Not for days yet. If--" He shut his mouth with an audible *snap* .

"If he ever wakes, I understand that." Delain sighed. "So there's no way of knowing about damage to his mind?"

"There are ways," the healer corrected. "Not to gauge his mind as such, but certainly to test if his nerves have been damaged. Reflex tests and the like."

"And the results?"

"Inconclusive." Patrin looked up at him, compassion in his pale eyes. "I wish I had better news for you, my friend."

"I know." Delain patted him on the arm once more. "I know."

The old healer brightened. "Still, he does have visitors--people who come to pay their respects and to wish him well."

"Oh?" Delain raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Others among the Elders. Friends, acquaintances. And others, concerned that he's receiving the best of care." Patrin's tone added an ironic edge to his last words.

"Oh?" Delain repeated.

"Yes, oh yes." Patrin nodded vigorously. "An honor contingent, as in days of old. Visiting him in watches, they are, like soldiers standing guard. I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I. Would you take me to them?"

Patrin led the way through the labyrinth of small chambers--sick rooms, as Delain thought of them--until he stopped at a door in the heart of the Great Hospital. "Here." Patrin pushed the door open.

The first thing Delain saw was his uncle lying on a bed. He wore a simple white smock--too much like a burial shroud, to Delain's mind--his skin, usually flushed with health, almost the same hue as the cloth. His uncle's eyes were shut, and his breathing was slower, stronger, not the frenetic, shallow panting of twelve hours before. The blue tinge had left his face and pate, but his lips still had a strange, almost deathlike tone. "Grais," Delain breathed.

"Good day, goodman Evenstar."

Delain's eyes flicked to the other occupant of the room; he hadn't noticed him at first, so intense his concentration on his uncle. Now he frowned.

The man was young, about the same size and build as Delain, standing beside the straight-backed chair in which he'd been sitting a moment before. The stranger wore a simple jerkin and trous of rough black cloth. His face was thin, almost pinched. He looks tired, Delain thought. Why?

"Good day ... "

"I don't think we've met," the stranger said. "My name is Jerrani Kaerkeep."

"Good day, goodman Kaerkeep," Delain responded slowly. The stranger was right, he thought, they *hadn't* met, and yet Kaerkeep looked familiar. Then his eyes fell on the bittern that rested beside the chair. "You're a troubadour."

"I have that honor, yes," Kaerkeep replied, "as do you and your uncle."

"You're one of the doomsayers."

Kaerkeep's thin eyebrows drew together. "We care little for that name," he pointed out dryly.

"What are you doing here?" Delain rounded on Patrin. "What is he doing here?"

The healer blinked his watery eyes. "He ... I ... " he stammered. "He asked."

"Who sent you? *Who?* "

Delain saw the other troubadour quail back from the heat in his voice, before pulling himself together. "No one sent me, goodman Evenstar," he said flatly. "I'm here of my own free will."

"And the other"--he shot a glance at Patrin--"members of the *honor guard* , they're troubadours like you? And they come of their own free will too?"

"Of course." Kaerkeep gestured his puzzlement. "I don't see why that concerns you, goodman Evenstar, really I don't. We respect followers of the High Art--*all* followers--and your uncle is one of the most renowned. When we heard about his ... *his break of faith--*"

Delain cut him off. "There was no 'break of faith,' doomsayer," he roared. "Somebody tried to kill my uncle." He knew he was losing control, his fear and grief somehow turning into a blinding anger, but he couldn't stop it. "Somebody ... tried ... to *kill* ... my *uncle* !" He punctuated the words with a finger jabbed into the chest of Jerrani Kaerkeep. "I don't know who, I don't know why. But until I do, nobody--*nobody* --comes near my uncle. Do you hear me?"

Again he rounded on Patrin. "And *you* , do you hear me too? Get him out of here, Healer"--he hooked a thumb over his shoulder to indicate Kaerkeep--"and keep him and the rest of his kind *out* of here. Is that clear?"

He pointed a trembling finger at the dark-clad troubadour. "Do you hear me, doomsayer? *Out!* "

Through the tears of anger and grief--and humiliation, at his own outburst--that filled his eyes, he didn't see the other troubadour depart.

Delain walked aimlessly through the corridors of the kaer. He was careful to keep to occupied areas, memories of the recent attack making him want to avoid less-traveled regions like the Scytha Stair, but beyond that, he paid little heed to where he walked. He felt the eyes of his fellow kaer-dwellers on him, but ignored them.

Grais looks as though he's already dead. **The thought brought bitter tears to his eyes, but it was the truth, wasn't it? The only sign that his uncle still lived was the steady rise and fall of his chest. Delain had never really thought about it before, but even when someone was asleep they always showed *some* signs of life. Their eyelids flickered as they dreamed; the muscles around their lips twitched and moved; the rhythm of their breathing changed. Up until now, he'd always unconsciously accepted the description of sleep from an ancient Throalic lay: "a visit to the realm of Death." Today, though, he knew the falsehood of that description. A sleeper was always closer to the world of the living than to oblivion.**

Not his uncle, not now. Grais was really "visiting the realm of Death" now, he thought bitterly. He should be glad that his uncle was still breathing, at least. Where breath remained, hope remained with it. But he couldn't shake the fear that the only thing still alive was his uncle's *body*--not that incisive, intuitive mind that had made him what he was. Had the glandroot extract ripped that mind from him, leaving him an empty husk? There was no way of knowing. Patrin the Bonesetter had repeated that half a dozen times during the hours Delain had sat beside his uncle's sickbed. Time alone would tell.

He'd wanted to stay with his uncle--sit in the chair beside the bed, sleep on the cold floor--to be present when the first sign of consciousness returned. But the healer wouldn't allow it. "One patient is enough of a burden, Delain," Patrin had told him firmly, "I don't want you to make it two." After six hours, the old

healer had almost physically driven him from the sickroom, ordering the younger man to go home and sleep.

Delain had left the Great Hospital, but he hadn't returned home. He just couldn't face that, couldn't face returning to the quarters he shared with his uncle, the quarters that would, he knew, seem so empty without Grais's presence. And more, he couldn't face the idea of sleep ... and the dreams that sleep would bring.

And so he walked the bustling corridors of Kaer Moar. He had no destination in mind, no itinerary. His drifting thoughts kept no track of how long he'd been wandering, how far he'd walked. He just walked on.

The crystals of light quartz mounted along the corridor walls were dimmed for the kaer's twelve-hour night when he returned to the Healer's Quarters. Which meant he'd been wandering for, what ... six hours? Maybe more? The quartz crystals surrounding the door of the Great Hospital still burned with their full intensity, however, as tradition dictated.

Patrin was in his office, poring over an old scroll spread across his desk. "Don't you ever leave, Master Healer?" Delain asked softly, wondering if it was the same scroll.

Patrin shot him a gap-toothed smile. "Oh, sometimes, sometimes. I snatched a two-hour nap not long ago. And you, Delain?" He fixed the younger man with a searching look. "Did your sleep do you good?"

Delain smiled crookedly. He couldn't bring himself to lie to the old man.

"Yes, well ... yes, I see." Patrin shook his head sadly. "I remember *I* was young once, too. And when I was young, I too thought the world might stop revolving if I wasn't keeping an eye on it."

"Any change?"

To his surprise, he saw Patrin drop his gaze. "He had visitors, your uncle," the healer said quietly.

"What?"

"While I was taking my nap," Patrin explained hurriedly. "My apprentice--a good girl, skilled in the art ... but young."

Delain waved that off. *"Who?"*

"Members of the Council. Two of them, Masters Corbyan and Wyrrel. And another. I'm sorry, Delain," Patrin rushed on, "my apprentice didn't think she had the authority to bar Elders from visiting your uncle. I explained to her that she *does* have the authority, but--"

"*Scourge* it, Patrin ... " With an effort, Delain reined in his anger, then sighed and said, "It's all right. I don't hold you responsible." Then he paused.

"I want to stay with him, Patrin. I don't care what you say, I want to stay with him. Do I have your permission?" Delain knew he'd stay whether the healer gave permission or not, but he still felt the need to ask.

For a moment, he thought Patrin might refuse. But then, the old man nodded. "I grant it," he said.

It was only later that Delain realized Patrin hadn't answered his first question.

Grais Evenstar, troubadour of Kaer Moar, and member of the Council of Elders, died in the small hours of the next morning. Delain was with him when he faded away, saw his uncle take his last breath, heard the air sigh out from Grais's lungs for one final time.

"There was nothing any of us could do," Patrin Gavort said quietly from the doorway. "His spirit is with Astendar now."

Delain nodded wordlessly. Uncle, he thought, uncle in name, but father in truth, the world--*my* world--has been diminished by your passing, the kaer is darker for your death. May Astendar take you to her bosom and cherish you. He reached out and touched his uncle's lips with the tips of his fingers. Softly, he gave the benediction that only a troubadour can give to another. "Through me, your Art lives on, Grais Evenstar. In your name, and in your memory, I take on the mantle of troubadour-adept." One last time, he took the hand of the man who'd raised him, lifted it to his lips, and kissed the already-cooling flesh.

Finally he turned to the healer. "Master Patrin," he began.

The old man shook his head. "Don't trouble yourself, Master Troubadour," Patrin responded, stressing the title. "Matters have been arranged."

Delain raised an eyebrow. "What? By whom?"

"The Elders." Patrin shrugged. "He's ... he was a member of the Council, and there are ... *traditions* ... to be observed." He sighed, glancing away uncomfortably. "They told my apprentice about it when they came in yesterday. Just in case, of course," he added quickly.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"You had other things to think about," the healer said simply.

Delain nodded at that. "Thank you, Master Healer," he replied, his voice soft. Then another thought struck him. "When you said Corbyan and Wyrrel came to visit, you mentioned 'another,' too. Who?"

"Kolban Darkways. He came with the Elders."

"*That* stormcrow? *Scourge* it!"

And again, in that strange alchemy Delain had experienced the day before with Jerrani Kaerkeep, his grief twisted in his breast--changed, became anger. He was on his feet before he knew it, striding purposefully from the sickroom.

"What ... ? Where ... ?" Patrin stammered.

But Delain didn't answer. You were right, Patrin, he thought grimly. I have other things to think about.

Delain found Kolban Darkways in the Hall of Princes on the Level of Astendar. The slight, white-robed figure was surrounded by a group of young people--male and female, mainly humans, but with a few dwarfs thrown in for good measure. Delain recognized two of them immediately--Marta Aravey and Jerrani Kaerkeep--and that identified the rest, as far as he was concerned. *The doomsayers, the stormcrow*

troubadours ... Kolban's little followers ...

"You!" **he cried out. "Darkways!"**

Heads snapped around to stare at him. The bright-eyed elf himself turned more slowly, an almost-invisible eyebrow lifted in ironic curiosity.

Delain pushed his way through the small knot of troubadours, shouldering Kaerkeep from his path. ***"You!"*** **he shouted again.**

As the young troubadour approached, the elf gave him a polite half-bow of greeting. "Goodman Evenstar," he said, his voice like velvet. "Please accept my condolences ... "

"How did you know he was dead, stormcrow?" Delain demanded.

Kolban shrugged his thin shoulders. "The healers told us it was only a matter of time," he replied smoothly.

"Quaalz!" **Delain spat on the floor to his left. "You killed him, stormcrow!" People were gathering, attracted by his raised voice, but he didn't care. "You killed him," he shouted again, "you and your doomsayers."**

The elf's sharp gaze didn't shift from Delain's eyes. "Yes," Kolban said after a long moment. "Yes, I *do* accept responsibility for your uncle's death, goodman Evenstar ... to a degree. If it was the prophecies that I helped these good people to find and decipher, if it was those truths that led Grais to take his own life, then, to that degree, I *do* accept responsibility."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it!" Rage pounded in Delain's head, his pulse a thudding drumbeat in his ears. "You *poisoned* him, Darkways. You or one of your ... your *puppets* ." Murmurs of outrage, of anger, swelled up around him, but he didn't care. "You killed him, and you tried to have *me* killed, too."

Kolban Darkways spread his long-fingered hands. "Why would I want to do that?" he asked simply.

The fragment **, Delain wanted to yell. You *wanted that, for some reason* . But he didn't say that. "I don't know, but on the Gift of Astendar, I swear I'll find out, and I'll bring you to task for it. Such is the truth of the thing."**

The mutters of anger from the gathering crowd reached a new crescendo. For the first time, Delain sensed the danger, could *smell* the barely restrained violence in the air.

"Horror-marked," he heard someone growl.

Another voice echoed, "Only a fool--or a tool of the Horrors--would so accuse a true guardian of the kaer."

Suddenly frightened, Delain looked around at the hard and hostile stares that surrounded him. All around him he saw hands clenched into fists, knuckles whitening around tools or carry-sticks. He sensed the crescendo of emotion flowing around him, and realized the crowd was about to become a mob.

The troubadours were glaring at him with undisguised hostility. As well they might, he realized, since he'd accused them of being pawns in a murder plot ... or worse. Only in the eyes of Marta Aravey did he see something other than hatred. And there, the pity he saw, the kind of pity a caring soul would feel for a sanity-touched twilighter, was almost worse. Desperately, he looked about for a way out. There was none;

the crowd--the mob--totally surrounded him.

"My heart goes out to you, Delain Evenstar." Kolban's velvet voice cut through the fierce mutterings of the crowd like a sword through silk. "I, too, have lost. I, too, know how grief can cloud the mind, can drive you in directions you'd never normally contemplate. A kind of temporary madness, grief." And the severe-faced elf smiled. "We'll talk again when the fit has left you." He turned away, and gestured for his retinue to follow.

Delain stood, frozen. The incipient mob that had swirled around him was gone; the elf's words had calmed the building fury as skillfully as the greatest troubadour. Anger was still there in the eyes of those surrounding him, but now it was admixed with understanding ... and even echoes of the pity he'd seen in Marta's gaze.

***"Scourge!"* Eyes filling with tears of impotent rage, he bulled his way through the crowd, not after Kolban Darkways, but in the opposite direction. Once he was clear of the press, he broke into a run.**